

Realizing the Potential of ‘Champions’ to Promote the Use of Research Findings

Summary

The Problem:

Research findings often need stronger support from policy-makers and health professionals to bridge the evidence-to-practice gap.

The Intervention:

In 2006, Family Health International (FHI) launched the Network of Champions project in which national advocates or “champions” worked to improve the status of family planning (FP)/HIV integrated services in four countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The project facilitated the use of evidence-based practices by harnessing the influence of these strategically chosen opinion leaders.

The Impact:

Using a combination of advocacy, education, and training, each champion increased awareness of and support for FP/HIV integration. An evaluation of the impact—including an assessment of a year-long extension to the project—will be conducted when the project is completed in 2009.

An advocate or “champion” of research utilization is an influential political leader, health care provider, or other authority figure who uses his or her expertise and professional contacts to help bridge the gap between research and programs, by promoting the use of evidence-based practices.

Engaging such opinion leaders is one approach that can facilitate the speed and ease with which research results are incorporated into clinical practice. However, more data are needed on the type and scale of impact that champions can have, as well as on how much support they need and how long they must be engaged to facilitate the greatest impact.

In July 2006, FHI launched a Network of Champions project to help document the work and impact of national champions of FP/HIV integration in sub-Saharan Africa.

Facilitating change

Building on previous experience

This Network of Champions project is a follow-on to and adaptation of a research utilization approach initiated by FHI in 2005, in which champions from Africa and Asia used partnerships with local stakeholders to promote the awareness and use of a variety of research findings that FHI considered “underused” in the field of reproductive health.

Promoting an evidence-based practice

The theme of the Network of Champions project (2006–2007) was the integration of family planning and HIV services, chosen because it is an issue of growing importance in sub-Saharan Africa and is a priority of FHI’s work that is supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Research has shown that integrating family planning and HIV services can reduce unmet health needs, yet more support for integrated services is needed at all levels.

Creating a supportive environment

Four champions—all working within the reproductive health or HIV/AIDS communities—were selected to promote integration in their respective countries. The champions were chosen from organizations that would lend institutional support to the project’s activities.

The champions were also strategically selected to represent a variety of opinion leaders, including both local service providers and national-level policy-makers. The goals for each champion reflected the kind of change expected from that particular level of opinion leader—ranging from training providers on integrated services to updating national policies, guidelines, and training curricula.

These choices were made so that the champions would all be working in supportive environments and within similar contexts, and so that they could successfully create a “network” for discussing and sharing challenges, lessons learned, and best practices.

Documenting changes

As of June 2008, the champions had achieved the following results:

Nigeria: Provided advocacy, education, and training on integration for policy-makers and health professionals; promoted integration among members of the MOH and for inclusion in the national HIV/AIDS strategy.

Tanzania: Assessed the need for integration; formed an integration working group; developed key advocacy messages; held advocacy meetings and workshops for key stakeholders; received approval from the Ministry of Health (MOH) to begin integrating services in PRINMAT clinics.

Uganda: Assessed the level of integration in a district hospital; offered educational workshops for health professionals and community leaders; discussed the project’s achievements on six radio

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shows; developed a postpartum family planning protocol to help prevent maternal-to-child transmission of HIV, which the MOH approved and will include in a minimum package of integrated services that it is developing.

Zambia: Developed consensus among partners on how to monitor the progress of integration; promoted integration among stakeholders and the public; surveyed the level of integration in selected facilities; trained providers from seven HIV/AIDS facilities on how to provide integrated services.

Promoting further use

Due to the significant progress of each champion over the first year, FHI will implement a follow-on year for the project, to continue support for the champion's activities and to evaluate the added value of extending this type of project from one to two years.

Staff from FHI met with the champions in Tanzania in March 2008 to share interim findings and to help guide the remainder of the project. A formal evaluation of the project's impact—including an assessment of the extended period of time—will be conducted when the project concludes in 2009.

In the meantime, global support for integration has been building among key stakeholders,

Current Champions

Nigeria: A physician from Sustainable Health Initiatives, a local nongovernmental organization providing technical assistance to the health sector.

Tanzania: A nurse-midwife from the Private Nurses Midwives Association (PRINMAT).

Uganda: A policy-maker from the Ministry of Health's STD/AIDS Control Programme.

Zambia: A registered nurse and coordinator of services (related to preventing maternal-to-child-transmission) from the Kabwe District Health Office.

donors, and program managers interested in fostering change. The use of champions has recently received increased attention. In April 2008, the USAID series "Women Making a Difference in Global Health" highlighted the champion model—specifically the work of FHI's champion in Tanzania.

Resource

Doumit G, Gattellari M, Grimshaw J, et al. Local opinion leaders: effects on professional practice and health care outcomes. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2007; (1):CD000125.

The Evidence Base

Engaging opinion leaders to promote change is an approach for advancing social, economic, political, and public health issues. Closely associated with the "diffusion of innovations" model of how innovations spread through social systems or cultures over time, the use of opinion leaders as "champions" is meant to increase the likelihood that an innovation will be adopted as a standard practice.

A variety of public health efforts are already using champions to help meet their reproductive health goals. These efforts include family planning initiatives such as USAID's Health Policy Initiative and BRIDGE Project; the World Health Organization's Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health; and several HIV/AIDS behavioral change programs that employ popular opinion leaders from the community.

The level of change expected from a champion differs according to his or her sphere of influence. The portfolio of activities appropriate for a community champion such as a nurse-midwife will not be equivalent to the activities undertaken and change facilitated by a prominent and powerful national-level champion, such as Tanzania's former President Julius Nyerere, a champion for family planning in the 1980s and 1990s. Engaging a range of champions along an influence continuum helps facilitate and institutionalize change at varying levels.

While the value of using champions has been well documented through experience, attributing changes in policy and practice to a champion's efforts is often difficult. A recent Cochrane review concluded, however, that the use of local opinion leaders can successfully promote evidence-based practices and is a promising strategy for translating research into practice.



Research to Practice

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