

Exploring the health bridge: Bilingual community health workers and the determinants of health

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Background/Purpose:

Providing culturally safe and responsive care to minority populations is a significant challenge for the healthcare sector. Within Australia, the role that Bilingual Community Health Workers (BCHWs) play in supporting minority populations has largely been overlooked in the literature. Using viral hepatitis (VH) as a case study we explored the services BCHWs provide to at-risk culturally and linguistically diverse populations. VH was chosen as the target health condition as it is a public health priority and increasing engagement with testing and treatment is essential to limit onward transmission and reduce morbidity and mortality. Gaining a better understand the mechanisms that enable BCHWs to provide culturally safe and responsive care, we developed a conceptual model that illustrates the processes through which BCHWs impact health and wellbeing.

Approach:

Seven semi-structures face-to-face interviews were completed. BCHWs detailed perceptions of their role, the barriers community members faced in accessing VH services and the mechanisms through which they overcame these barriers. Three coders conducted thematic analysis. The literature in the field was reviewed to further inform the development of a conceptual model of BCHWs as a healthcare 'bridge'.

Outcomes/Impact:

BCHWs form a bridge between the healthcare system and their clients, providing knowledge, acting as navigators of an unfamiliar health system, and responding to the diverse needs of their clients, frequently addressing social, cultural and environmental barriers that impact on their ability to prioritise their own health.

Innovation and Significance:

The often 'invisible' interventions undertaken by BCHWs that we have uncovered should be of interest to health care policymakers as they represent opportunities to leverage social services to improve health equity.

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