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Strengthening community level primary health care in Vanuatu: a trial of output-based incentives for Village Health Workers

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Abstract

Background: The Health Sector Strategy (2021-2030) reaffirms the Ministry of Health's commitment to strengthening Primary Health Care, through evidence-informed, strategic allocation of resources. In 2019, the Village Health Worker Program commenced a trial to use annual incentive payments as a means to strengthen Primary Health Care at the community-level, through Village Health Worker (VHW)-led community engagement and health promotion activities. The national Health Information System (HIS) collects monthly activity reports from Aid Posts, which collate clinical consultations, community engagement and health promotion/disease prevention activities led by VHWs.

Methods: An analysis of annual HIS data from all Aid Posts (n=204) over four years (2018-2021, inclusive of baseline) sought to explore changes in output against key eligibility criteria for the incentive payments, namely: • Submission rates for Monthly HIS • Community-engagement/ participatory activities led by VHWs • Community health awareness activities conducted by VHWs (improved WASH, family planning, promotion of healthy lifestyles). • Support to visiting outreach activities from MCH, vector control or immunization teams.

Results: HIS data confirmed sustained, positive impact with incentive payments on VHW output. Specifically, graphical representations demonstrate improved outputs for: reporting; community-participatory clean-up activities; delivery of health education and awareness presentations; family planning discussions and referrals; VHW support to visiting public health teams.

Discussion: The incentive payments had a measurable, positive influence on VHW performance, both in terms of reporting and output. The relatively small investment in recognizing VHWs' performance makes a significant contribution to delivery of Primary Health Care services at the community-level. This investment is enhanced through improved program contact and communication with the VHWs.