



Optimizing the Roles of Village Health Workers in Vanuatu: A Case Study

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Abstract text

Background: Limited access to quality health services and human resource shortage remain challenges in Vanuatu. Village Health Workers (VHWs) are the sole care providers who contribute to strengthening primary health care at the community level through health promotion activities, and provision of basic health care in Vanuatu. In 2022-23, the Ministry of Health (MoH) with technical assistance from WHO conducted a study to review the existing VHW program and identified challenges.

Methods: The study involved mixed methods of interviews, focus group discussions and surveys as a case study, which were conducted between September 2022 and July 2023.

Results: We found three key issues with the implementation of the VHW program in Vanuatu: training, incentives, and coordination and management. First, VHWs are inadequately trained to carry out the responsibilities as per the Role Delineation Policy (MoH, 2018), particularly the roles in dispensing medicine and providing treatment. Furthermore, there is a lack of financial and non-financial incentives to attract VHWs to work at the aid posts. Limited career pathway retains VHWs in the same position for a long period. Lastly, although the coordination and supervision mechanism of the VHW program is clearly specified, major discrepancies are identified in the implementation.

Discussions: These findings highlight a need for effective reform which could address multiple challenges by prioritizing on development of the VHW training program. Rather than working on an entirely new curriculum, integrating existing training programs can be considered, which brings minimal disruptions and financial implications to the current health systems. The advanced training system could create a career path for VHWs along the lines of either nursing pathways or community development. The findings could potentially serve as a lesson learnt for conducting reviews in similar programs in terms of strategizing the development of community health programs and curricula in other countries.