

Community Health Risk Factor Management Research Project

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Background: Lifestyle risk factors are the main preventable risk factors for chronic disease. Along with general practitioners, community health services are in an ideal position to deliver brief interventions to reduce the risk of chronic disease. Little is known however about how to make risk factor management a core element of the work of community health services. This project aimed to 1) develop and test models of risk factor management in community health services, 2) determine the impact of models clinician knowledge, attitudes and practices and 3) explore factors influencing the uptake of models, and how they can be sustained and transferred to other sites.

Methods: Models of risk factor management were developed collaboratively with three community health teams located in urban and rural areas in NSW. Changes in clinician knowledge, attitudes and practices were assessed by pre and post clinician survey (n=37) and prospective client audit. Factors influencing the uptake of risk factor management practices and issues related to sustainability and transferability were also explored through semi-structured interviews with participants (n=30).

Findings: Models varied between teams in terms of the type of intervention deemed appropriate (individual, group or community based), the approach to counselling (planned or opportunistic) and scope of intervention (all lifestyle risk factors or selective risk factors). The project resulted in significant improvement in clinician knowledge and confidence and positive changes in some attitudes, and risk factor management was better integrated into routine care. Rates of screening increased for alcohol and physical activity and remained high for nutrition and smoking from baseline to post intervention. However the levels of intervention remained unchanged (except for an increase for alcohol). Uptake was influenced by clinician beliefs and attitudes, organisational factors and the way the project was implemented. Long term system level support is likely to be required if clinicians are to sustain changes in their clinical practice.

Implications: The project findings support community health services as an appropriate setting to address lifestyle risk factors. However due to the diverse nature of service delivery, models of intervention will need to be tailored to the team or disciplines' way of working. Changing clinician practices is likely to take time and require ongoing training for staff and organisational support in order to make risk factor management 'core business' for community health services. Further work is needed to see how the developed models fit into the work of other community health teams and the impact of models on client outcomes. This study provides important insights into how to improve the detection and management of lifestyle risk factors within primary health care, This may contribute to improved prevention and management chronic disease.

Further Information: For a copy of the full project report or any further information, please contact:

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