INTRODUCTION

What is primary health care?

Primary health care is socially appropriate, universally accessible, scientifically sound, first level care provided by health services and systems with a suitably trained workforce comprised of multidisciplinary teams supported by integrated referral systems in a way that gives priority to those most in need and addresses health inequities, maximises community and individual self-reliance, participation and control and, involves collaboration and partnership with other sectors to promote public health. Comprehensive primary health care includes health promotion, illness prevention, treatment and care of the sick, community development, advocacy and rehabilitation. (Australian Divisions of General Practice, 2005).

Lack of Evidence

Despite its apparent promise there remains a lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of Comprehensive Primary Health Care (CPHC) as a strategy for disease reduction and health improvement.

Evaluating in complex and changing systems

Health systems are complex and the Australian system is further complicated by a variety of jurisdictional interests and roles, and waves of reform that result in an ever-changing policy and operational environment. The complexity of health systems limits the usefulness of models of health services research which emphasise linearity, determinism and impartiality (Kernick and Sweeney 2001; Greenhalgh et al., 2004). The constant cycle of reorganisation in the health system also requires research methods to be flexible enough to accommodate changes in the management structures of health services, the policies and systems that influence them and in the models of practice used.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research is designed to encourage participation and to inform policy and practice. To this end, a range of participation and dissemination strategies are being used: the formation of a Critical Reference Group comprising key decision-makers and stakeholders; research symposia, newsletters, use of web-based technologies; and plain English reports of research outputs.

A 5 year program of work was designed to study PHC services as a whole rather than as “slices” of their activities.

A Case Study Approach

The study uses six case study sites providing differing models of primary health care and a mix of management models including an Aboriginal community controlled health service, a non-government organisation and others funded and managed as part of the South Australian State Government health care system.

Developing a program logic model of CPHC good practice

In the first stage of the project a program logic model of CPHC good practice has been developed.

Program logic models are a method for articulating how and why service components are likely to lead to desired individual and population health outcomes based on theory, evidence and values. They outline a causal pathway. Dwyer et al (2004) outline the causal pathway in this way, …a theoretical causal pathway where desired outcomes such as improved health status and wellbeing are premised on the generation of certain impacts, such as changes in modifiable risk and protective factors operating in individuals and environments. These impacts are premised on changes in processes and/or structures such as improved capacity and higher quality or better coordination of services and programs. In turn, the implementation of new processes and structures requires a range of inputs or activities such as supporting policy directions, workforce development and funding. These chains of inputs and effects take place in a wider social and political context that mediates the effectiveness of all elements.

and make clear the relationship of such a model to evaluation, … if empirical evidence of change can be seen for each of the points along the continuum, then it can be reasonably predicted that the outcomes are as far as part attributable to the program’

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

The research team is committed to producing policy and practice relevant research. This project demonstrates:

• Relevance to current state, national and international policy questions
• Significance in addressing an under-researched topic of importance
• Timeliness, given the unique opportunity presented by the establishment of the new CPHC centres, the commitment of Australian governments to reform of the health system, the desire to institute better systems of managing chronic disease and increased interest globally in CPHC.

Diabetes and mental health are two of the national health priority areas in Australia. Inclusion of two Aboriginal case study sites gives us an opportunity to examine models of service with the potential to improve the health status of Aboriginal people which is significantly worse than that of other Australians.

Through involvement of policy-makers and practitioners in an action research process formative feedback is provided to inform further development of CPHC within services and in the broader policy domain.

The study contributes to the further development of evaluation approaches appropriate to health services delivered in complex community-based settings.

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Information about the findings of Stage 1 of this research is shown in the poster “Evaluating the effectiveness of comprehensive primary health care in local communities: Primary Health Care practice in Australia.”

REFERENCES

