

The role of community volunteers in promoting improved, responsive and equitable primary health care in LMICs: an umbrella review

Mirkuzie Woldie¹, Garumma Feyissa¹, Kalkidan Hassen¹, Bitiya Admasu¹, Kirstin Mitchell², Martin McKee³, Susannah Mayhew³, Dina Balabanova³

Review Questions and Methods

Community health volunteers (CHVs) are members of the community with little or no formal training as health workers but regularly involved in linking the primary health care system with the community in which they live and work. The question the review addressed the following research questions: How do the different roles adopted by CHVs impact on access to and utilisation of PHC services by community members? What is the role of the CHV on community engagement in PHC activities? What barriers and facilitators influence the effectiveness of the CHV cadre? What resources, within and beyond the health system, are required to sustain the work of the CHVs? A review of systematic reviews (umbrella) review was carried out after systematic search in PUBMED, EMBASE, ProQuost, Campbell, DOPHER and Cochrane data bases. The initial search yielded 248 systematic reviews relevant to the review questions. We included articles published between Jan 1, 2000 and August 15, 2016. We found a total of 248 systematic reviews in the initial search. After removing duplicates and screening based on inclusion criteria (title, abstract and full text) and critical appraisal we ended up in 21 systematic reviews for inclusion in the current review.

Key Findings

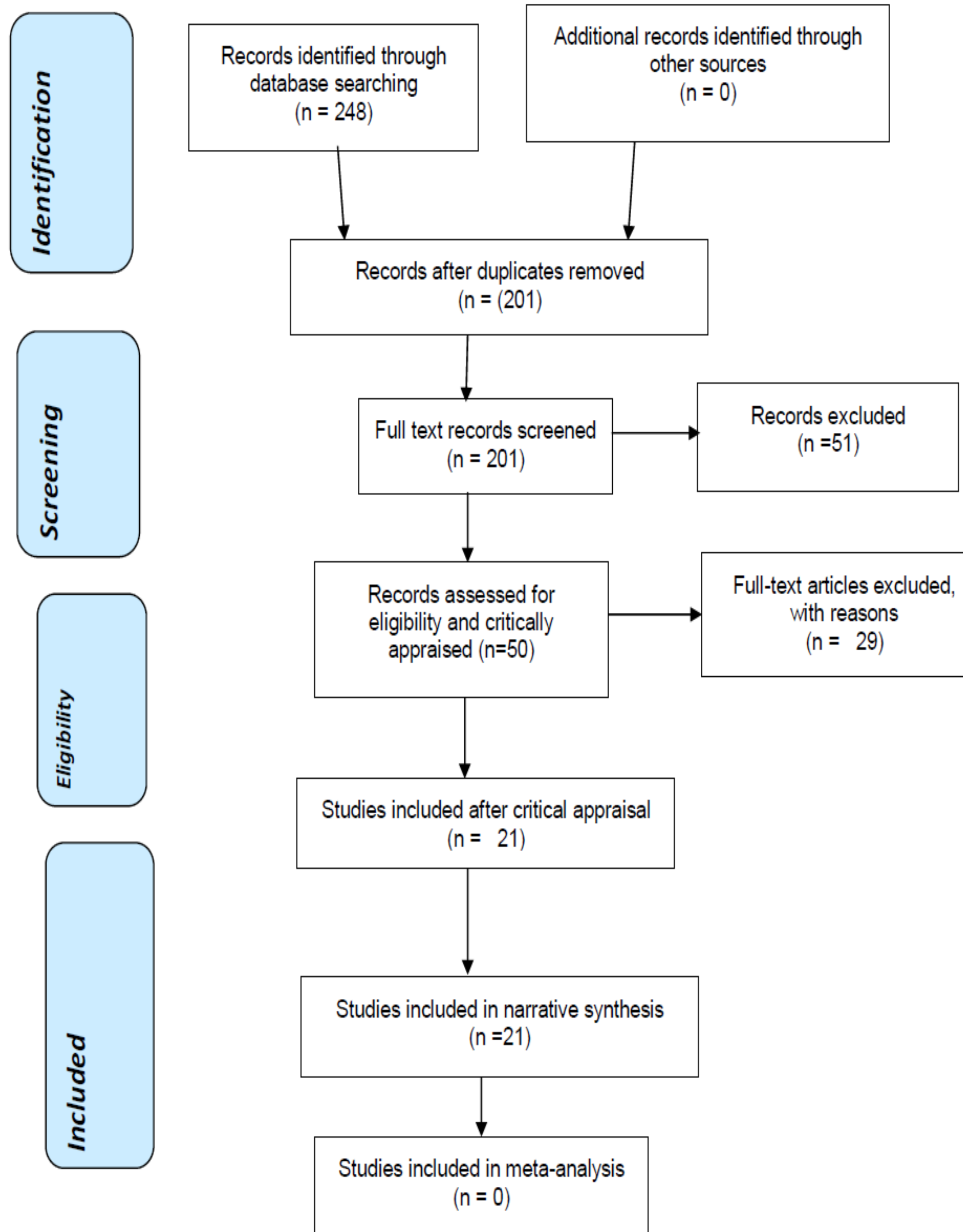
In this review we identified three key issues in relation to role of CHVs in the primary health care system. The first, CHVs were found to be cost effective, if interventions are selected, supervised and monitored carefully. We also noted that effectiveness of CHVs is context- or setting-specific. Second, the reviewed health volunteer's model proved to be successfully if they are fully embraced by the community. Third, the review revealed that CHVs with minimal training and educational level could significantly support the improvement of access to and utilization of PHC services in resource limited settings.

Roles played by CHVs

The different roles played by CHVs include delivery of antiretroviral therapy, prevention of mental health problems, pre-referral treatment of malaria (artemisinin), behaviour change counselling, routine immunization, family planning, community case management of malaria, directly observed therapy for treating tuberculosis, and community based newborn care.

Conclusions

The review demonstrated that community health volunteers play a crucial role in the provision of primary health care services in disadvantaged population segments of low income countries. They are primarily contributing to increasing access and utilization of PHC services while relieving the overstretched health systems in these settings.



From: Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, Altman DG, The PRISMA Group (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement. *PLoS Med* 6(6): e1000097. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed1000097

Figure 1: Study selection process

Contributions of CHVs to PHC

- ❑ **Accessibility and utilization:** many of the reviews included in these study (17) indicated that CHVs have effectively contributed to improving access and utilization of primary health care services.
- ❑ **Behaviour change counsellors:** it was noted that CHVs are successfully playing their role of providing health information to the community members.
- ❑ **Task shifting:** involvement of CHVs in primary health care activities ranging from mobilization of community members to provision of antiretroviral therapy has resulted in reducing the burden on health facilities and health care providers.

Barriers and facilitators affecting effectiveness of CHVs programs

Barriers identified while employing community health volunteers' programs include vague definition of the group, selection of appropriate task, lack of supervision, work overload of community health volunteers and poor supply chain management, lack of support and acceptance by the community, lack of family or spouse support among other factors.

Successes recorded relate to the following measures

- CHVs were recruited from or by the community
- Consistent management and supervision of CHVs and CHV program
- Respected and motivated people were selected as CHVs
- Regular support and training
- Pay, stipend, or transportation support provided
- Ensuring sustainable supplies
- Women's involvement
- CHV programs are designed in culturally acceptable way
- Activities of CHV viewed as valuable by community