Bridging the Gap

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY HEALTH VOLUNTEERS FOR THE EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT OF ACUTE MALNUTRITION: A CLUSTER RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL IN TURKANA AND ISIOLO COUNTIES, KENYA.

Summary

Treatment of children with acute malnutrition has failed to achieve high coverage and impact because of barriers in accessing health facilities where treatment services are usually located. This study, conducted in Turkana and Isiolo counties, Kenya, aimed to investigate the effectiveness and the cost of integrating treatment of acute malnutrition into integrated community case management (iCCM). The study shows that working with community health volunteers (CHVs) to treat children with acute malnutrition at the community level increased recovery rate, reduced defaulting rate, and reduced the length of time to recovery compared with treatment of children in health facilities. Most of the CHVs correctly managed children with acute malnutrition. The cost per child treated was lower in the intervention group than in the control group in both counties. The community and the CHVs were generally satisfied with the intervention. Enabling factors for the intervention included community sensitization, CHV training and mentoring, use of simplified tools and protocols and proximity of CHVs to caregivers, among others. Challenges and barriers included low literacy levels of CHVs which affected their learning and reporting, reluctance among some caregivers to accept the new role of CHVs at the beginning, interrupted commodity supply, increased CHV workload, and inadequate financial incentives for CHVs among others. This intervention could accelerate access to treatment of acute malnutrition in areas with limited access to health services and contribute towards achieving the goal of the Kenya Health Policy 2014-2030 of attaining the highest possible standard of health for all Kenyans.

Background

Undernutrition is associated with about half of all deaths among children younger than five years. Community-based management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) has been recommended by the WHO. However, in many countries, these services are only available at the health facility level. This makes them inaccessible to children because of factors such as geographical barriers and indirect costs, hence low coverage and impact of acute malnutrition treatment. Consequently, many acutely malnourished children are never treated or receive treatment too late. Integrated community case management (iCCM) is a strategy for managing childhood illnesses, including pneumonia; diarrhea; and malaria, at the community level using trained and supervised community health volunteers (CHVs). The iCCM package also includes identification and referral of malnourished children to health facilities for treatment and follow-up. Including the treatment of acute malnutrition at the community level in the iCCM package offered by CHVs has the potential to increase access to acute malnutrition treatment services in areas with poor access to healthcare. This aligns with the Kenya Health Policy 2014-2030 whose goal is to attain the highest possible standard of health for all Kenyans by supporting equitable, affordable, and high-quality health services.

Methods

We conducted a cluster-randomized controlled study to assess the effectiveness of working with CHVs to manage acutely malnourished children at the community level (at home or near home) in Turkana and Isiolo counties. In the intervention group, CHVs and Community Health Assistants received training on management of acute malnutrition and refresher training on iCCM. The sessions focused on the use of simplified tools and protocols for the screening and management of children with malnutrition at the community level.

KEY MESSAGING

- Working with CHVs to treat children with acute malnutrition at the community level increased recovery, reduced defaulting, and reduced the length of time to recovery.
- The cost per child treated was lower in the intervention group than in the control group.
- The enabling factors included: Community sensitization, CHV training and mentoring, use of simplified tools and protocols and proximity of CHVs to caregivers.
- The challenges included: Low literacy levels of CHVs which affected their learning and reporting, increased CHV workload, and inadequate financial incentives for CHVs.

THIS INTERVENTION COULD ACCELERATE ACCESS TO TREATMENT OF ACUTE MALNUTRITION IN AREAS WITH LIMITED ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES IN LINE WITH THE KENYA HEALTH POLICY 2014-2030.
Results

There was a higher recovery rate, lower defaulter rate, and shorter length of stay in the intervention group than in the control group, in both Turkana and Isiolo.

Table 1: Performance indicators for treatment of acute malnutrition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Intervention Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recovery rate</td>
<td>Turkana</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Default rate</td>
<td>Turkana</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Default rate</td>
<td>Isiolo</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-response rate</td>
<td>Turkana</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-response rate</td>
<td>Isiolo</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay</td>
<td>Turkana</td>
<td>49.7 days</td>
<td>73.9 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay</td>
<td>Isiolo</td>
<td>49.8 days</td>
<td>71.0 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight gain</td>
<td>Turkana</td>
<td>2.7 g/kg/day</td>
<td>1.8 g/kg/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight gain</td>
<td>Isiolo</td>
<td>1.4 g/kg/day</td>
<td>0.8 g/kg/day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall CHVs in both Turkana and Isiolo performed well on key of management of acute malnutrition actions. In Turkana, more than 90% of CHVs correctly performed 9/10 actions for the management of acute malnutrition. In Isiolo, more than 70% of CHVs correctly performed 6/10 actions (Figure 1).
Treatment of acutely malnourished children by CHVs significantly increased recovery, reduced defaulting and reduced length of stay in the program in Turkana and Isiolo, and was not inferior to the standard care. The community and the CHVs were generally satisfied with the intervention. Most CHVs correctly performed most of the critical actions for management of acute malnutrition. The cost per child treated was lower in the intervention group than in the control group in both Turkana and Isiolo. This intervention could accelerate access to treatment of acute malnutrition in areas with limited access to health services and contribute towards achieving the goal of the Kenya Health Policy 2014-2030 of attaining the highest possible standard of health for all citizens.

Subject to further testing and piloting in different settings, this intervention may be scaled up to accelerate access to treatment of acute malnutrition in areas with geographic barriers in access to health services. This is particularly timely in the current context of COVID-19 pandemic, which might have negatively affected the utilization of health services.

Experiences, enabling factors and challenges of including CMAM into iCCM

Community members were happy with the CHVs’ treatment services because it increased accessibility to care. Caregivers were generally satisfied with the delivery of services to their children by CHVs. Similarly, the CHVs were contented with the additional task of treating malnourished children. The facilitators of effective integration of CMAM into iCCM included community sensitization, mentorship; on-the-job training; and supervision of CHVs, use of simplified tools and protocols, immediate deployment of CHVs after training, proximity of CHVs to caregivers, and provision of a stipend to CHVs. Challenges of implementing the intervention included low literacy levels of CHVs which affected their learning and reporting, malfunctioning of some equipment, reluctance among some caregivers to accept the new role of CHVs at the beginning, some community members expecting CHVs to deliver care beyond their scope, interrupted commodity supply, inadequate number of CHVs and increased CHV workload, and inadequate financial incentives for CHVs.

Conclusions

Treatment of acutely malnourished children by CHVs significantly increased recovery, reduced defaulting and reduced length of stay in the program in Turkana and Isiolo, and was not inferior to the standard care. The community and the CHVs were generally satisfied with the intervention. Most CHVs correctly performed most of the critical actions for management of acute malnutrition. The cost per child treated was lower in the intervention group than in the control group in both Turkana and Isiolo. This intervention could accelerate access to treatment of acute malnutrition in areas with limited access to health services and contribute towards achieving the goal of the Kenya Health Policy 2014-2030 of attaining the highest possible standard of health for all citizens.

- Subject to further testing and piloting in different settings, this intervention may be scaled up to accelerate access to treatment of acute malnutrition in areas with geographic barriers in access to health services. This is particularly timely in the current context of COVID-19 pandemic, which might have negatively affected the utilization of health services.
- Given that the duration of the study was relatively short, there is a need for continuous monitoring of the quality of care rendered by CHVs to ensure it meets the minimum standards and to identify areas for improvement.
- There is a need to review the CHVs’ workload when designing a similar intervention. The number of households served by a CHV, the population density/the distance a CHV has to cover to reach households, and the prevalence of malnutrition should be considered. A higher number of CHVs may be required if the population served is sparsely populated or the prevalence of malnutrition is high.
- For CHVs to effectively deliver the intervention, they should be adequately trained, incentivized and continuously mentored and supervised. The Community Health Services Bill, 2020 should be implemented to solve the problem of financial incentives for CHVs. The use of simplified tools and protocols will contribute to the success of the intervention. The implementation of the intervention should be accompanied by community sensitization to increase uptake of the intervention and to clarify the new role of CHVs.

Figure 1: Percent of CHVs who performed actions for the management of acute malnutrition

The effect of the intervention on coverage

The intervention did not significantly affect treatment coverage. In Turkana, coverage was 62.5% in the control area and 61.2% in the intervention area. In Isiolo, coverage was 46.3% in the control area and 51% in the intervention area. The lack of significant changes in coverage may be attributed to scale up of emergency response actions that affected the intervention and control areas thereby obscuring any changes that could have been due to the intervention.

The economic cost of the intervention

In Turkana, the total cost of the intervention was US$ 83,453.3 in the intervention group and US$112,116.3 in the control group. The cost per child treated was lower in the intervention group (US$ 351) than in the control group (US$ 514). In Isiolo, the total cost was US$ 77,108.7 in the intervention group and US$ 82,481.7 in the control group. As in Turkana, the cost per child treated was lower in the intervention group (US$ 335) than in the control group (US$ 1057) in Isiolo.
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Acknowledgments
This study was led by the African Population and Health Research Center.

We acknowledge the Ministry of Health-Kenya, UNICEF, Save the Children International, and Action against Hunger for their role in designing and implementing the study. We thank the International Rescue Committee for providing simplified tools and protocols. The study was funded by UNICEF Kenya, USAID/OFDA, Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, Save the Children International, Action against Hunger, and American Express Foundation. WFP provided Ready-to-Use Supplementary Food. Finally, we thank the study participants, the CHVs, community health assistants and the sub-County and County Ministry of Health Officials, and the Technical Advisory Group members, for making this study successful.

References

Training of community health volunteers