Introduction

In West Bank, Palestine, emergency areas (Area C, as classified by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, or OCHA) are isolated, with highly limited access to health and nutrition services. World Vision provides preventative care in a number of these areas, through the implementation of a Community Health Worker approach, known as Timed and Targeted Counselling (ttC). The catchment area of World Vision operations is 780 children under 5 years of age.

Objective

To assess the effectiveness of public health preventive approaches using community health workers in emergency affected areas.

Intervention

The Timed and Targeted Counselling (ttC) approach was implemented. ttC is a family-inclusive behaviour change communication (BCC) approach targeting pregnant women (in the last trimester) and their supporters, and parents of children up to 12 months of age, through appropriately-timed household visits. ttC delivers a comprehensive set of messages appropriate to gestation or child’s age. Household visits cover essential life-saving health practices and services. Mothers received two household visits per month for 15 months.

Methods

Study setting: The intervention was evaluated using a household survey administered by community health workers at the selected mother’s household in South Hebron (Area C communities) in West Bank.

Study design: Pregnant women in their third trimester were invited to participate in the study. A pre and post household survey was administered to 260 mothers of infants born during the year 2016. An external consultant was hired to develop, pre-test and validate a standard questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered by community health workers who received training on the survey tool and data collection methods.

Data analysis: Data collection was done using mobile phones. SPSS was used for statistical analysis. Chi square tests were performed to assess for significant change in exclusive breastfeeding practices, infant vitamin D supplementation, management of childhood illness and iron/folic acid use in pregnancy.

Results

Pre- and post-intervention evaluation shows significant improvements in indicators related to child health and nutrition (Figure 1).

Discussion

- Targeting mothers of infants with timely and appropriate infant and young child feeding practices and caring messages significantly influenced the adoption of critical, positive behaviours.
- Communicating the messages at a household level by skilled community health workers encourages open discussion and a timely referral of urgent cases to health professionals.
- During the study period there were fewer reported disease episodes (diarrhea, respiratory illness, fever, ear infections) among the targeted children.

Figure 1: Reported change in breastfeeding, supplementation and diarrhea management practices

An unexpected outcome of this approach was the effect of the intervention on the well-being of community health workers. There was a noticeably positive effect on their personalities, where they became recognized and respected members in their communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Home based interventions by trained community health workers proved to be an effective approach in emergency classified areas.
- The ttC approach has positively influenced various practices related to infant and young child feeding.
- Scale-up plans for ttC integrated with an early childhood stimulation component and maternal mental health should be considered.

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1 Infant & Young Child Feeding, micronutrient supplementation, newborn care, management of childhood illness