

## **“She is my teacher and if it was not for her I would be dead”: Exploration of rural South African community health workers' information, education and communication activities**

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### **Abstract:**

Community health workers (CHWs) are important resources in health systems affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. International guidelines on task-shifting recommend that CHWs can provide diverse HIV services, ranging from HIV prevention to counselling patients for lifelong antiretroviral therapy. There is, however, little evidence on the experiences with CHW delivery of these services in Africa. This qualitative study included 102 interviews that explored experiences with information, education and communication (IEC) activities provided by CHWs within rural South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with CHWs ( $n = 17$ ), their clients ( $n = 33$ ) and the primary caregivers of these clients ( $n = 30$ ), allowing for data source triangulation. Twenty-two follow-up interviews explored emergent themes from preliminary interviews. Despite limited formal education and training, CHWs in this study were significant providers of IEC, including provision of generic health talks and HIV-specific information and facilitation to support clients' entry and maintenance in the formal health system. They often incorporated local knowledge and understanding of illness in their communication. CHWs in this study were able to bridge the lifeworlds of the community and the formal services to expedite access and adherence to local clinics and other services. As mediators between the two worlds, CHWs reinterpreted health information to make it comprehensible in their communities. With growing formalisation of CHW programmes in South Africa and elsewhere, CHWs' important role in health service access, health promotion and health maintenance must be recognised and supported in order to maximise impact.

### **Introduction**

In the many countries where lack of human resources is a critical barrier to the provision of HIV services (Barnighausen, Bloom, & Humair, 2007), community health workers (CHWs) are an important resource (Lewin et al., 2010). CHWs' deployment has been a key mechanism for scaling up HIV service access (Schneider, Hlophe, & van Rensburg, 2008). Guidelines on task-shifting have suggested that CHWs can provide diverse support activities, including identification and linkage of HIV-positive individuals to care, provision of basic HIV clinical services and counselling of patients for lifelong antiretroviral therapy (ART) (WHO, 2008). There is, however, little





















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