Reviewer’s report

Title: Generating demand and community support for sexual and reproductive health services for young people: A review of the Literature and Programs

Version: 1 Date: 9 July 2010

Reviewer: Jane Fisher

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Promotion of young peoples’ participation in sexual and reproductive health care is of international importance especially in resource-constrained settings where need is high and service availability is low. This review surveys the available evidence about interventions to generate demand for sexual and reproductive health services among young people and to increase community support for their use.

The review has been conducted rigorously with a clearly described and duplicable method, including distinct inclusion criteria. A set of papers was identified and the objectives, methods and findings of the projects they report are described in an appropriately structured table. Together these permitted evaluation of the evidence of effectiveness of in-school, community-based, youth centre-based, health centre outreach, media and voucher finance, peer-education and life skills approaches to improving demand by adolescents for and their use of sexual and reproductive health services.

Overall the paper is technically sound, but there is one important aspect of the description of the selected reports that is relevant, but has not been included. The projects are evaluated by research criteria, but it is not made clear which were initiated and conducted as research studies and which were only ever to be assessed by health program evaluation techniques. Most resource-constrained countries lack national research funding mechanisms and are dependent on international support to undertake research. Official development assistance is however most commonly spent on specific projects, which while they are evaluated, are not usually initiated as primary research. Randomized controlled trials, especially of complex interventions, require high level technical skills and substantial financial resources and in this circumstance are uncommon. It is important to identify which of the projects were initiated as research and which were established in response to need and then evaluated. It is not in my opinion accurate to describe the latter as ‘studies’. The projects are in general appraised as failing to provide high quality evidence of effectiveness, but if they were not research then an argument needs to made about why it is appropriate to evaluate them by research criteria. If the reports are evaluations of health or social welfare programs, then they should be appraised by the criteria of the field of systematic formal program evaluation, which might include before and after assessment of service use as well as acceptability, salience, satisfaction and accessibility. The funding source for each project should be reported in the table.
There is no acknowledgement of the limitations imposed by the difficult social and economic environments in which these projects were undertaken and it would be useful to provide some comparison with the evidence from trials of interventions to increase demand for and use of adolescent sexual and reproductive health in high income countries.

My final concern about this paper is its readability for a wide audience who will not necessarily be familiar with the field and the technical terms related to assessment of strength of evidence but will nevertheless be interested to learn about this field. These include:

• In the Abstract, the Background needs to include a statement of the problem as well as the aim of the review and the Results should summarize the extent of the available evidence rather than just reporting that it is ‘under developed’;
• The Introduction opens with a strong claim about ‘far too little being done’ to meet the sexual and reproductive health needs of young people rather than arguing towards this assertion;
• While the Background provides a rationale for the review, it has the tone of an advocacy document rather than a review undertaken to address a clearly argued gap in knowledge and ends with a summary of what was found (which belongs in the Discussion) rather than a specific aim;
• It cannot be presumed that acronyms for agencies are known to all readers e.g. AEGIS, AVERT;
• The results of the search should be placed at the beginning of the Results section and the inclusion criteria are not described until the Results, but are required in the Methods;
• Definitions of some terms as they are being used in this paper would assist the reader e.g. ‘developing countries’; ‘cross-cutting methodologies’; ‘social mobilization techniques’; ‘social franchising’; ‘supply side interventions’ and ‘demand side activities’;

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests