

Addressing the social determinants of health: A role for a clinical decision-aid in an Aboriginal context?

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Background

There is a growing literature and an increasing number of clinical tools to help health workers take action on the social determinants of health (e.g. food insecurity, exposure to violence, discrimination, etc.) in clinical practice. However, it is unclear whether clinical decision aids such as the CLEAR toolkit (www.mcgill.ca/clear) can also be used by health workers serving Indigenous communities, which are often remote and have unique social and cultural considerations.

Research objective

We aimed to explore the challenges and opportunities for frontline health workers in taking action on the social determinants of health in Indigenous communities, and how to make sure that such initiatives are culturally safe and meet local needs.

Methods

We conducted a qualitative study in two Northern Cree communities to obtain a wide range of views to better understand the main social determinants of health involved and how to best adapt current approaches for addressing these issues in clinical practice.

Results

In total, 38 health workers and community members participated in 24 individual in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups. Respondents considered that using a clinical decision aid would be helpful for initiating discussions around social challenges and better supporting patients in clinical practice.

I'm not from here, so I really don't know about services that are actually in the community... So it would really help me out. – Community worker

A lot of healthcare workers think about just what we can see and often they forget that there might be other extenuating circumstances and it might bring it to light, things that they have never thought about before - Rehabilitation worker

That is not something I was taught how to do... I would have benefited from that sort of training before – Nurse.

The CLEAR toolkit was considered particularly appropriate for a First Nations setting as it encouraged a holistic approach to health and may help to overcome challenges relating to the high turnover of healthcare staff and their consequent lack of knowledge of the local resources and practices.

Conclusions

Due to the highly intertwined nature of health and social challenges, frontline health workers are well placed to ask about the social determinants of health and to provide concrete suggestions for supporting patients and guiding community level action. Knowing how to ask about these issues in a sensitive way and mapping out existing community resources and referral pathways are important pre-requisites for implementation.

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For more information

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