



Washington, D.C.

Using Lay Health Navigators to Improve Mammogram Appointment-Kept Rates

Public Health Problem

In Washington, D.C., an estimated 500 new cases of female breast cancer were diagnosed and approximately 100 women died of the disease in 2003. The District of Columbia Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program, also known as Project WISH (Women Into Staying Healthy), promotes the early detection of breast and cervical cancer among uninsured and underinsured women aged 18 years or older in the District of Columbia. Although Project WISH has been extremely successful in enrolling clients in the screening program, ensuring that women keep their appointments for screening examinations has been a challenge.

Program Example

Lay health navigators are often an effective link between health promotion programs and the community because they share the same language, culture, and beliefs as community members. Research shows that lay health navigator programs are particularly relevant for African American women because they often seek advice from female friends or relatives before making health-related decisions. To improve the appointment-kept rate for women with scheduled mammogram appointments, Project WISH began the Navigator Program in November 2001. To establish the Navigator Program, Project WISH identified women in the community who were familiar with the health care system in the District of Columbia. Lay health navigators were trained to focus on eliminating the fear and distrust that reduced the likelihood of women keeping their cancer screening appointments. The navigators then provided counseling, identified support services, and reminded clients about upcoming mammogram appointments.

Implications and Impact

Project WISH staff members evaluated the effectiveness of the Navigator Program and found that before the program began, 35% of women completed screening on the initial appointment date, compared with 70% of women after the program began. Furthermore, women served by the Navigator Program were five times more likely to complete breast cancer screening examinations on the scheduled appointment date than women who were not served by the program. Use of lay health navigators is an effective community outreach strategy for improving the appointment-kept rate because these navigators help reduce barriers to screening. As more women complete screening, more cancers will be detected in early stages, which may decrease breast cancer deaths.

Contact Information

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