

Accessibility of Healthy Start to women and young children in low income families: findings of a multi-method evaluation

Authors: Alison McFadden, Julia Fox-Rushby, Josephine M Green, Victoria Williams, Subhash Pokhrel, Jenny McLeish, Felicia McCormick, Nana Anokye, Melina Dritsaki, Mary J Renfrew

Introduction

Healthy Start is a statutory scheme that provides food vouchers and vitamin supplements to improve nutrition of low-income women and young children. 20% of those eligible do not claim the food vouchers and only 1% of vitamin supplements are claimed.

Health professionals are gatekeepers to the scheme – they are required to sign application forms and encourage uptake of vitamin supplements

Methods

Focus groups, a national electronic consultation, participatory workshops and telephone interviews explored the views of health practitioners and user advocates (n=669), and low-income women (n=113).

Two cross-sectoral workshops, attended by practitioners, service commissioners, policy-makers and advocacy groups (n=56) developed recommendations and identified barriers to and positive strategies for their implementation

Barriers to accessing Healthy Start

- Complex eligibility criteria - clear for those receiving welfare benefits but confusing for working families with low household income and receiving tax credits



- Inappropriate targeting of information by health professionals

I was only told about Healthy Start when my child reached three. I was not informed at the time

- Access was challenging for women who did not speak English, had low literacy levels, were in low paid work or had fluctuating incomes

I had to keep applying because they kept telling me I wasn't eligible but I was

- Complex and unreliable application process

- Few registered retailers in rural areas, and low registration among smaller shops and market stalls serving culturally diverse populations

- Lack of awareness of need for vitamin supplements and a dysfunctional supply and distribution process

The scheme is the most complicated one to implement that I have ever come across.



Conclusions

- As a result of barriers to registering for Healthy Start and accessing retailers and vitamin supplements, many women and children who could benefit from the vouchers and vitamins do not receive them
- Those most likely to miss out are in low-paid or fluctuating work, do not speak English, have poor literacy levels or live in rural areas.

Recommendations

1. Improve access to Healthy Start by simplifying eligibility criteria and streamlining the application process
2. Provide application forms in alternative languages and formats
3. Make vitamin supplements free and universally available for childbearing women, and children up to their fifth birthday
4. Increase awareness of Healthy Start among small retailers and market stallholders



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Contact: Alison McFadden:
a.m.mcfadden@dundee.ac.uk
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