

Integrating cancer screening to reduce health inequities, an Australian example

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Background

Australia has population-based cancer screening programs to address breast, bowel and cervical cancer. The effectiveness of these organised cancer screening programs to reduce cancer incidence and mortality is well documented; however, inequities exist with some population groups less likely to participate. The same population groups are underrepresented across all three cancer screening programs and consequently have poorer health outcomes. Integrating cancer screening is an emerging practice to address this challenge.

Methods

The Under Screened Recruitment Program was an innovative initiative designed to improve cancer screening participation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse and low socio-economic communities in Victoria, Australia – through the development and implementation of communication and recruitment strategies across all three programs. Key elements of this state government funded initiative, piloted in 2013-2016, included stakeholder engagement, community partnerships, improved access to services, and a focus on cancer screening systems and processes within health agencies.

Results

The health disparities apparent in Victoria didn't develop overnight; and it will take time and a continued investment of resources before significant results are seen. However, there are signs that taking an integrated approach to cancer screening is a promising practice that should continue.

Within the pilot sites, there are now systems and processes established to address cancer screening collectively. New relationships with local screening providers have been established, the local workforce and community are more aware of cancer screening, and the community and sector have engaged with the program.

Conclusions

The Under Screened Recruitment Program has shown that the three cancer screening programs can work together to address health inequities that exist within their common underrepresented population groups.