

Workshops for Community Health

IMPROVING HEALTH IN LONDON CASE STUDY

Project title:	Workshops for Community Health
Location:	Fulham
Date:	May 2003–May 2004
Funding:	King's Fund Millennium Award



Context There are a number of health issues that are specific to certain community groups. For example, sickle cell disease currently affects 10,000 people in the United Kingdom, most of whom are African-Caribbean, while lupus affects around 50,000 people in the United Kingdom, most of whom are black and Asian women.

Observing the impact of such health issues on his local community and the reluctance of people to discuss them, Millennium Award winner Imo Akpan decided to run a series of six health education workshops targeted at particular groups. The workshops addressed a range of issues, including khat addiction, osteoarthritis, HIV and Aids, diabetes, lupus and sickle cell disease, with the aim of raising awareness, providing information about prevention and treatment, and encouraging discussion.

The Millennium Awards scheme Between 2001 and 2004, the King's Fund worked in partnership with the Millennium Commission to offer grant-funding, support and training to 255 people working at community level to improve the health of Londoners. Each person received a maximum £2,000 cash grant from Lottery funding, and took part in a 13-day King's Fund leadership development programme designed to build skills in project management and networking.

This is one in a series of case studies exploring how individuals living in London have used the King's Fund Millennium Awards scheme to make a real difference to the health of others in their communities.

Workshops for Community Health

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While working at a west London community centre, Imo Akpan recognised a reluctance among people to discuss the health issues affecting their communities. He felt that the resulting lack of awareness presented a barrier to efforts to tackling the problems. Consequently, he decided to run a series of workshops focused on specific health issues and targeted at particular groups. His aim was to provide information about prevention and treatment and give people a chance to discuss their concerns. The workshops covered a range of topics, including addiction to khat (a plant-based stimulant), arthritis, dental care, HIV and Aids, sickle cell disease, lupus and diabetes.

Why did you get involved?

For a number of years, I've worked at a community centre in Fulham. The centre provides local communities with activities and services ranging from computer classes and karate to social evenings for the elderly, and advice for Somali women. Working at the centre has brought me into contact with a variety of people, making me increasingly aware of the health issues affecting different community groups – for example, the problem of khat addiction within the Somali community and the prevalence of sickle-cell disease within the African-Caribbean community. I have noticed that there is a reluctance to talk openly about these issues and feel that this silence hinders efforts to tackle the problems.

Occasionally, the centre runs education workshops to promote healthy ways of living. In the past, I've helped out at some of these workshops, giving out flyers and encouraging people to come along. I've also done voluntary work with the Sickle Cell Society. These experiences inspired me to run workshops of my own, informed by the needs I'd observed within various communities. At each workshop, I hoped to provide relevant information and advice, as well as to create a space for people to talk freely about their health problems and think collectively about how to improve their situation. The Millennium Award provided me with the funding and leadership skills that I needed to carry out my project.

What is your project?

My project consisted of six health workshops in total. In the first, I tackled the issue of khat – a plant-based stimulant that makes people more animated and talkative. Unfortunately, it is addictive and increases aggressiveness when chewed regularly. Khat is particularly popular among Somali men. Many of those attending my workshop were Somali women who were angry about khat's damaging effects on their husbands, and the consequences of this for their families and community. Although I tried to keep the workshop focused on health issues, people were keen to discuss khat from a political angle. They wanted to know why khat is legal in the UK but banned in the US, Canada, Japan and Sweden. After the workshop, I wrote a letter to the health minister on the subject, but so far have received no reply.

I held my second workshop for a group of elderly people who meet regularly at the community centre. The topic was osteoarthritis – a condition that afflicts many older people, causing swelling, pain and stiffness in the joints. Unable to find a suitable speaker, I brought in a reflexologist to show how reflexology (a form of foot massage) can ease arthritic symptoms. As I already knew the elderly people at the centre, it was fairly easy to persuade some of them to attend the workshop. Initially, they were quite sceptical of reflexology and reluctant to volunteer for taster sessions. However, once they had seen the technique demonstrated on some of the kitchen staff, they were queuing up to have a go.

Talking to some Somalis, I discovered that poor dental health is a problem within their community. I therefore decided to do my next workshop on dental care. A dentist gave a presentation on dental hygiene, followed by a question and answer session. Unfortunately, the attendance was poor. However, of the six that showed up, two were community leaders and two were youth workers, and they promised to pass on the information to the rest of the community.

My next workshop was on the subject of HIV and Aids for the students at Hammersmith and West London Education College. The event coincided with World Aids Awareness Day, which helped to generate interest among the students. A doctor gave a talk, dispelling some of the myths about the disease by explaining what it is, how it can be contracted and the precautions that can be taken to avoid infection.

Following this event, I organised a workshop to celebrate Black History Month. This was a small event aimed at local people with a particular interest in health issues. The purpose of the workshop was to inspire participants to get involved in improving the health of the community by considering the lives of black historical figures who have made great contributions to health care. I began the workshop with a presentation on Mary Seacole, a black army nurse, who overcame racial and gender prejudice to become a heroine of the Crimean War, and Dr Drew, a black doctor who pioneered the use of blood transfusions during World War II. This was followed by a group discussion of the material.

My last workshop looked at sickle cell disease, lupus and diabetes – chronic conditions that have to be managed with drugs and other medical interventions. Although prevalent within the African-Caribbean community, these conditions are rarely discussed and little understood. The workshop consisted of presentations on each of these conditions from a representative from the local sickle cell support group, a lupus sufferer and a representative from Diabetes UK, followed by a question and answer session. Because the workshop addressed a range of health issues, it attracted a large audience of between 50 and 60 people.

How did you get people involved?

I made flyers to advertise each workshop, which I handed out on the street and at the community centre, as well as emailing them to my list of contacts. I also visited other community centres in the area to tell them about the events. The New Deal for Communities office helped by displaying the flyers in their windows and distributing them to their list of contacts, which included local hospitals and GP surgeries. For the HIV and Aids workshop, the student union at Hammersmith and West London college did some of the publicity for me. I also made an effort to talk to people face-to-face in the community. I spent time in a Somali cafe, chatting with people and attempting to persuade them to come along to my workshops. I also tried to entice people with the prospect of free food, drink and transport.

What kind of help did you need?

The Millennium Award money enabled me to set up and run my project, paying for basic administration costs, photocopying, the production of the flyers, hiring the venues and providing food and drink. I also received support from a number of people at the community centre, who gave advice on how to organise the workshops. On the day of each workshop, I persuaded a number of friends and other interested community members to help out with logistics.

The King's Fund, local hospitals and PCTs, and some of the other community leaders who run groups at the centre all helped me to find suitable speakers for my workshops by putting me in touch with some of their contacts.

What challenges did you face?

My main challenge was overcoming people's resistance to talking about these health issues. This resistance made it very difficult to persuade people to attend the workshops. Often people would tell me that they would attend, but then fail to turn up on the day. As a result, I never knew quite what size of venue I needed, how much food and drink to buy, even whether I would have enough participants to make the workshop viable. For certain workshops, I even had trouble finding people to give talks – lupus was particularly challenging because it is such a taboo illness.

The khat workshop presented additional challenges because there are people in the Somali community with vested interests in ensuring that khat remains popular. I advertised the workshop with a leaflet entitled: 'Just say no to khat'. When one of the khat sellers saw the leaflet, he confronted me on the street, telling me to mind my own business. After that, I had to avoid all the khat sellers in the community. Some of them tried to organise a boycott of my event, although we still managed to attract sufficient numbers in the end. Basically, it seemed that they didn't want people from other communities to get involved. That was my impression.

What lessons did you learn?

Participant feedback indicated that the timing of the workshops is crucial. Most of my workshops took place during the day. This was fine for those workshops intended for older people and students, but problematic for those aimed at a



broader audience because most people are at work or school during the daytime. In future, I'll try to hold workshops at more accessible times, although it can be difficult to engage speakers out of working hours.

On a personal level, I've learned that, in order to run the workshops effectively, I needed to assert my authority by briefing volunteers clearly about their roles and responsibilities. Initially, I found this quite challenging. However, it became easier as I gained in confidence and experience. Where there were differences of opinion between myself and volunteers, I learned not to take the conflict personally or let it disrupt the workshops.

I've also realised that it's important to have faith in myself and not be put off by the negative comments of other people. It can be quite vicious in the community – there are always people who try to put you down, or dissuade you from carrying out your project, either because they're jealous of you, or because they disagree with what you're doing.

Where does your project go from here?

Where health is concerned, I think there's always more work to do. I've applied for another King's Fund grant to fund further workshops on health issues, such as mental health and fibroids. I would also like to run my workshops elsewhere in the UK – in Leeds and Manchester, for example – as well as overseas.

What advice would you give to others?

Firstly, if you want to do a project, find out what the community needs and wants. Go out onto the street and talk to people – ask them about the problems that they're facing in their lives. Secondly, when running a project, it's important to have back-up plans because setbacks and disappointments are inevitable. When things do go wrong, try to stay calm and positive. Have faith that everything will work out in the end.

To motivate yourself, focus on the purpose of your project and the sense of achievement that will come when you make a difference to people's lives. Surround yourself with people who share your vision and enthusiasm – they will support you when you're flagging.

Interested?

The Millennium Awards scheme has now closed, but the following funding opportunities remain:

King's Fund grants We offer about £1.5 million a year in grants to London-based community organisations working to improve health and health care (t: 020 7307 2495, e: grants@kingsfund.org.uk, w: www.kingsfund.org.uk/grants).

Unltd This is a national body set up to provide grants, training and support to individuals working to make a positive difference in their communities (t: 020 7566 1100, e: info@unltd.org.uk, w: www.unltd.org.uk).

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