Private troubles to public issue: empowering communities to reduce alcohol-related harm in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

Alcohol is the number three contributor to the burden of disease worldwide so must remain a priority health promotion issue internationally. Malaysia is a Muslim country and alcohol-related harm was not seen as a priority until recently, because it only affects a minority of the population. Sabah has more than 30 different ethnic groups, and alcohol has a traditional role in the cultural practices of many of these groups. In 2009, the Intervention Group for Alcohol Misuse (IGAM) was formed, under the umbrella of Mercy Malaysia by a group of healthcare workers, academics, members of the Clergy and people who were previously alcohol-dependent concerned about the harmful effects of excessive alcohol consumption. IGAM in collaboration with other bodies have organized public seminars, visited villages and schools, encouraged the formation of a support group and trained healthcare professionals in health promotion intervention. The focus later changed to empowering communities to find solutions to alcohol-related harm in their community in a way which is sensitive to their culture. A standard tool-kit was developed using WHO materials as a guide. Village committees were formed and adapted the toolkit according to their needs. This strategy has been shown to be effective, in that 90% of the 20 committees formed are actively and successfully involved in health promotion to reduce alcohol-related harm in their communities.