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Implementing preventive care guidelines in general practice: lessons learnt from preconception care

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Interventions to promote more effective delivery and uptake of preventive care in general practice are urgently needed. Guidelines for preventive activities before pregnancy exist, yet studies demonstrate low levels of knowledge and behaviour in women of reproductive age and suggest low levels of preconception care delivery by GPs. We aimed to improve implementation of preconception care guidelines in the general practice setting.

We used "Intervention Mapping" to systematically develop a quality care intervention. Following a barrier analysis we undertook a before and after study of the effects of a two part intervention: academic detailing and provision of resources (a preconception care checklist, website and patient information sheet) to GPs and use of waiting room posters informing women of the availability of preconception care by GPs. We measured the various components of preconception care delivered by 10 GPs during 90 consecutive consultations with women of reproductive age pre and post intervention and conducted follow up interviews with all GPs and a sample of 25 of the women patients.

Delivery of any component of preconception care doubled, increasing from 11% to 21%. Posters in the waiting room were ineffective at encouraging women to attend for preconception care or to raise preconception care during the current consultation. Despite feeling better skilled and resourced GPs still found it hard to deliver preconception care opportunistically.

The major barriers to preconception care - lack of patient awareness of need and opportunistic delivery - may be relevant to the implementation of other preventive care guidelines in the general practice setting. Further research is needed to determine if patient based strategies such as letters of invitation to attend for preventive care and web-based risk assessment tools prompting consultations may be more effective at achieving implementation of preventive care guidelines than strategies aimed at changing behaviour of medical practitioners.