What is a lay health worker?

A lay health worker (LHW) is defined as a health worker who performs functions related to health care delivery and is trained in some way in the context of an intervention, but who has not received a formal professional or paraprofessional certificate or tertiary education degree. (WHO)

Other terms for LHW

- CHW community health worker
- VHW village health worker

LHW’s form an important point of interconnection between communities and the rest of the health system.

Benefits of integrating LHW’s into a national health structure...

- They connect community members to available services & resources, so extending the reach of healthcare providers and services
- They strengthen programme compatibility with local practices & deliver services that are appropriate; based on local language and culture
- They act as a liaison between providers, patients, and families/caregivers
- They improve referral systems and health worker relationships
- They gain support from other organizations serving the community
- They strengthen overall health service delivery

DID YOU KNOW...? Use of LHW is not a new phenomenon.

The 1st LHWs can be traced back to rural China in the 1920s.


The use of LHW really gained traction in the mid-1990s, sparked by the most notable factor, that being, the rapid spread of the HIV epidemic and then a growing interest in health care decentralization.