

Do you want to become an 'Agent for Change'?



A Diabetes SA Outreach project improving the lives of health workers, their patients, and communities.

Noy Pullen

Are you struggling to accept your own health status and the changes needed? Are your patients not responding to your advice? Are you at your wits end with a loved one who seems

to have a death wish? Then this course is for you. You are the leader you yourself have been waiting for!

Bongi, a beautiful young woman, sat with tears streaming from her eyes as she shared her terror. "I have just had my eyes checked and they say unless I lose weight and control my blood glucose I will be blind in the right eye. I have a young daughter. Who is going to look after her? I don't want to die."

The diabetes educator was moved to tears as she felt Bongi's pain. This was no ordinary patient however. Bongi is a professional nurse from a diabetes ward, attending one of our Agents for

Change courses. Her colleagues suddenly realised the futility of saying, "She is non compliant! A defaulter! She's in denial!" The penny had dropped. If a professional nurse can't accept the fact that she has diabetes and the changes needed to manage it, how much more difficult is it for lay people?

This scenario shows, firstly, that diabetes is a complex condition needing ongoing assurance, education, and support, even for professional health workers. Secondly the professional nurse who is obese, buying ama gwinya (vetkoek) from the vendor for her tea, and unable to accept her own

▶ condition, is not going to help her patients change their lifestyles.

The vision

The focus is on the attitude of health professionals toward self-care, to 'walk their talk', and also to facilitate a more balanced and healthy lifestyle through peer cooperation and social hygiene. Many of the 600 health workers already trained admit that even though they are academically trained, they have never really understood diabetes and have had a fear of nursing patients with the condition. They feel under skilled to face the tasks at hand

From theory to practice

Skills learned address the impact of diabetes on the patient, improving communication, favouring negotiation, honesty and actively acknowledging the burden placed on the patient, anticipating and addressing the psychological distress over time to prevent chronic burnout, and also emphasising the positive effects of successfully managing the disease in particular and life in general.

Motivation & structure

Change needs rhythm and time to manifest – regular interventions into old habits accompanied by patience and recognition of success.

Three essential aspects were identified –

- Two intensive two-day workshops for healthcare providers and /or community leaders, six months apart, attended by the same group of participants
- Ongoing back-up support to the health providers for a period of two years
- Formal peer recognition.

Course one – Agents for Change

Targeting the professional team, for example - professional nurses, dieticians, pharmacists, paramedics, community health promoters, its aim is to change attitudes toward their own health.

Their measurements, for example, blood pressure, blood glucose, weight, height (BMI) and waist circumference are documented under a non de plume and kept on record.

Knowing what we need to change is the first step to a healthier, balanced lifestyle which can then cascade down to the colleagues and communities.

Clinical aspects of diabetes, symptoms, medication, and complications are revised and updated. The psychological aspects of chronic conditions are debated and practical tools are demonstrated, focusing on personal growth.

The final session focuses on vision building and practical goal setting both in their personal and professional lives. These visions statements are sent to the participants in their first letter after the course as a reminder of their commitments with a questionnaire to give us feed back on how they doing.

Course two - 'Empowering the Patient' Workshop

The same participants attend this workshop six months later to follow up on progress. Body Measurements are compared to the previous ones to determine the actual improvement. The difficulties involved in changing one's lifestyle and the reality of their own and their patients' situations are used as material for the workshop.

On a personal level, the health professionals have now had time to change their lifestyles, eating habits, and exercise routines. Professionally they have had the opportunity to practise the new skills and techniques demonstrated in the previous workshop.

The most vital aspect of the second course is the volunteers in the group with diabetes who share and evaluate their current daily blood glucose readings before and after meals and before and after exercise during the entire course.

They become educational tools bringing to life the challenges faced by someone with diabetes. In many cases the closeness of a colleague's challenges, like Bongzi's, is enough to bring participants to tears.

Role playing scenarios, taken from actual experience of the previous six months, for example, emergency interventions, education, counselling and support groups, are assessed and guided by peers and by the facilitators. These hands-on skills enrich their diabetes education, encouraging them to empower those living with diabetes, to become advocates for healthy living, and so preventing chronic diseases and the complications of diabetes in their communities.

The use of language

We address the impact of thoughtless jargon, for example, calling a patient 'a diabetic' (instead of a human being living with diabetes), using terms like 'non-compliant' or 'defaulter' (terms actually written on the client reports), all of which dehumanise and cast blame on the patient rather than creating ways to change the situation.

Innovative tools included in workshop packs

For starters, a tape measure is included in the workshop pack. According to a recent study, for every 5cm increase in waist circumference a man's mortality risk increases by 17% and 13% for a woman.

To facilitate good foot-care, participants draw each other's foot on a piece of paper and place their shoe on top. They can then check whether the shoe fits properly. This encourages well-fitting footwear and is a fun ice-breaker at support group meetings.

The Diabetes & You comic was developed especially for people who do not read. Simple colourful pamphlets are used practically on all aspects of diabetes care. The song - 'I can face any challenge' is used at the start and end of each session, demonstrating the power of the artistic medium, as a tool for education and communication.

Sustainability

During the six month period between the two workshops there is ongoing support. A copy of Diabetes Focus is sent to each participant every quarter for two years, to keep them up to date with the latest research in diet, medication and exercise.

Regular questionnaires are distributed to participants to assess their changes. The information from the questionnaires is used to formulate the content for the second workshop. Each participant who returns the questionnaire gets points towards a certificate of excellence and a prize in the form of extra Diabetes & You comics or a pack of 'mind matches' - inspirational cards developed for counselling and support groups.

Recognition of excellence

Agents for Change participants are awarded certificates of excellence. A 'Champions of Change' award is achieved by returning questionnaires to the facilitators and bringing their 'Agents for Change' diabetes file to the second course. The 'Dedication to Diabetes' award requires a portfolio of evidence, witnessed by a colleague, and listing their initiatives in their communities, for example, starting a support group, a food garden, an exercise initiative, talks, awareness days, and fun walks.

For the 'Service Above Self' award participants nominate one of their peers for outstanding commitment to diabetes and health promotion.

Partners

The World Diabetes Foundation, Airports Company of South

Africa, Dube Trade Port, Discovery Foundation, Anglo American Foundation, and SA Breweries, are among some of the generous donors supporting this work.

In the words of one of the participants - "Let our lamps shine through networking; using our very different, special qualities, learning from each other, where our health community is a source of knowledge and support for our patients."

Helping us to make a difference

We constantly need funding to cater for the overwhelming need and requests for these courses all over South Africa and would be grateful for assistance from your CSI fund. If you can help or would like to attend an Agents for Change course, contact Noy Pullen on 072 2587132 or linoia@mweb.co.za for further information



Agents for Change participants are awarded certificates of excellence.