

Peer groups for primary health care providers in Ukraine. Two in one: professional development and burnout prevention during COVID-19 pandemic

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Background

Ukrainian-Swiss Medical Education Development Project, implemented by Swiss TPH under financial support of the Swiss Development Cooperation Office, launched the peer groups (PGs) for primary health care (PHC) providers in Ukraine in 2020. Peer groups are seen as one of the continuing professional development (CPD) activities for health care providers. Before 2020 this CPD format for both medical doctors and nurses was not present in the country at all. Peer groups format changes the approach of medical professionals toward their CPD. They become proactive and ready to take a leading role and responsibility for their learning.



Pic.1. Peer group from Lviv.

Peer groups are small groups of specialists with equal positions who meet regularly to critically discuss their medical practice and learn from each other's experience to improve quality of care.

Study design

The aim of the study is to assess the experience of peer groups members on the peer groups' role in their development that goes beyond just the professional one.

The study applies a case study methodology and data comprise the feedback and reporting forms from peer group facilitators and members. Also presented cases during the trainings, meetings, supervisory sessions provided additional information on how peer groups contribute to quality of CPD, motivation of PHC professionals, interaction in teams.



Pic. 2. Map of peer groups for medical professionals distribution across Ukraine.

Implementation process

- Winter 2020 – concept development and facilitators training preparation by the Medical Education Development project.
- Spring 2020 – re-design of the training for peer groups facilitators, transforming into an online format because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- June 2020 – the first online training for peer group facilitators: 18 graduates – PHC doctors and nurses.
- Autumn 2020 – the first peer groups are operational: 5 groups for PHC doctors, and 4 groups for nurses.
- Winter 2021 – the second online training for new facilitators: 23 graduates.
- Spring-Summer 2021 – two more trainings for new peer group facilitators in partnership with USAID project Health Care Reform Support in Ukraine: 35 graduates.
- October 2021 – the First Congress for peer group facilitators took place for further training, experience exchange, and community building.
- Winter 2022 – 50 PGs for PHC professionals are up and running in Ukraine, covering at least 500 participants.

Peer groups continue to work during the martial law, being among the limited CPD options available for medical professionals now.



Pic.3. Peer groups from Kharkiv, Chernivtsy, Rivne, Kherson.

Implementation results

Peer groups proved to be accessible, flexible and based on the real needs of medical professionals CPD format. During the COVID-19 pandemic, peer group meetings were the only possibility for medical professionals to meet offline and to learn and share key updates on COVID-19 treatment as soon as possible. During the military invasion of Russia, peer groups are being a unique opportunity for lots of medical doctors and nurses to continue CPD at the workplace or online, in case medical professionals were temporarily displaced.

● *'This is a great opportunity to get together, discuss important topics, learn, and immediately implement new things into practice', Yulia Nechyporuk, family doctor, Rivne city.*

● *'It is almost for the first time we are learning really important things for our practice. I like that we can ourselves decide on the topics of the peer group meetings', Leonid Melnyk, Ladyzhynka village, Cherkasy region.*

● *'COVID-19 treatment was a very important and urgent topic to discuss. Thank you for bringing us together and sharing this knowledge. I was looking for this information for some time already', family doctor, Chortkiv town, Ternopil region.*

Among the key advantages of peer groups, medical professionals also mention open communication, reduction of the stress level, team building which leads to the burn out prevention as there is a safe space within medical facility to share concerns and look for solutions for existing problems, as well as to devote time to special training to prevent professional burn out.

● *'Peer group gave our team a possibility to be more open in our communication and discussions of clinical cases. We could build trust. That's why our doctors are getting more ready to share their doubts and even mistakes, as they see there is no judgment or punishment. Previously it was impossible' Natalia Tunik, peer group facilitator, Novotroitske village, Kherson region.*

● *'Peer group meetings give us emotional recharge and allow us to communicate openly', Maria Bilozir, nurse, Lviv city.*



Pic.4. Peer group facilitators, Autumn 2021.

Conclusions

Peer groups contribute significantly to the development of CPD system for medical professionals in Ukraine. Especially address those challenges which require urgent communication between colleagues, or knowledge and experience sharing under unpredictable circumstances. Also, this format contributes to better interaction in a team, ensures trust-building, ensures delivery of necessary support in crisis situations and burnout prevention.

Peer groups raise a lot of interest from medical professionals and promote the further the development of medical professional community in Ukraine.

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