From Efficacy to Public Health Impact:  
A Call for Research on Program Delivery 
and Utilization in Nutrition$^1{-}^3$

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Abstract

Despite the high potential of nutrition interventions to save lives and to improve the quality of life of those who survive, programs are not being implemented effectively or at scale in most regions of the world. Research on delivery and utilization is urgently needed to fully unleash the potential of nutrition programs. The symposium sought to explore knowledge on determinants of delivery and utilization, demonstrate approaches for studying them, and highlight future research needs. J. Nutr. 138: 628–629, 2008.

Improving child nutrition globally has a high potential to save lives and ensures a better quality of life for those who survive. More than half of current deaths among children <5 y of age would be averted if children were well nourished when they became ill (1,2). Accordingly, 6 of 23 recommended interventions to reduce child mortality (3) and 3 of the 4 key actions to improve child development (4) are nutritional in nature. Ensuring that children are well nourished in early childhood, however, is challenging because programs that can prevent and reduce undernutrition are currently not being implemented effectively or at scale in most regions of the world (5). In most developing countries, the current systems for service delivery are inadequate, and the utilization of existing services is low, especially among the poor (6,7).

Improving the delivery and utilization of health and nutrition programs depends on the behaviors of policy makers, program planners and implementers, markets, and civil society and frontline health providers but also on the behaviors of households and individuals and the support they receive from their families and communities (see Fig. 1 for examples of key actors at the different stages between program design and health impact). Research focused on delivery and utilization of programs and services can shed light on these processes and build an evidence base to inform decisions about the best options for delivering key interventions. The kind of research needed requires perspectives from disciplines as wide ranging as organizational behavior, household economics, anthropology, and policy sciences, to name a few.

Despite the importance of understanding delivery and utilization of health and nutrition services better, research on this topic is limited because of both a lack of funding and limited expertise and/or interest among biologically or clinically oriented scientists. In a recent analysis of research on the causes of global child mortality, it was found that a mere 3% of research efforts were directed toward research on health delivery and utilization, notwithstanding the large returns to research on this topic (8). A strikingly similar picture emerged from an analysis of antiplatelet therapy and statin use in the United States (9). At the same time, there is a growing recognition of the importance of health systems research (10). This provides an opportunity to scientists in nutrition to engage with and capitalize on the existing and emerging expertise and funding for research on health systems.

The knowledge to fully unleash the potential of existing and newly designed efficacious nutrition interventions will only come from concerted efforts at studying factors that influence delivery and utilization of these interventions in a variety of contexts. Therefore, the symposium aimed to 1) explore our knowledge of factors that affect the delivery and utilization of nutrition interventions; 2) demonstrate conceptual and methodological approaches for studying factors influencing program delivery and utilization; and 3) highlight questions that call for further investigation in the coming years. In these proceedings, 6 articles are presented that illuminate a variety of issues and research questions pertaining to program research on delivery and utilization. Marsh et al. (11) present a comprehensive framework for program design, planning, and evaluation. Menon et al. (12) discuss the importance of assessing organizational roles in the context of a program evaluation in Haiti. Leroy et al. (13) review
the enrollment and utilization of Oportunidades, Mexico’s conditional cash transfer program. Winch et al. (14) present research on the community response to the introduction of zinc and combination therapy in southern Mali. Finally, Garrett (15) comments on the symposium presentations and proposes an agenda for future research on program delivery and utilization.

**Literature Cited**


9. Woolf SH, Johnson RE. The break-even point: when medical advances are less important than improving the fidelity with which they are delivered. Ann Fam Med. 2005;3:545–52.


**FIGURE 1** Key actors in improving the delivery and utilization of nutrition and health programs.