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National Health Surveys: Whose priorities?

A case study of the Palestinian Family Health Survey (PFHS) 2010



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Background

International population health surveys are vital for national planning, implementation and monitoring of health programmes and policies. Yet little is known about how the content of these surveys is developed.

Aim

To analyse the content and scope of the Palestinian Family health Survey (PFHS) 2010 in order to identify data gaps and Palestinian women's needs.

Methods

Mixed methods:

1. Qualitative content analysis of questionnaires
2. Statistical analyses of data on women's health

Results

The PFHS is limited in scope and does not consider women's health across their entire life-course, especially beyond reproductive ages. Non-comparable questions were asked of women based on their age and marital status.

Do women 55-59 years old have any health problem? Do they need to seek health care?

Do we need to ask 27 questions on HIV/AIDS when the opt rates are very low?

Do elderly women have post menopausal and/or genitourinary tract problems?

Do never married women have health problems and do they need to seek health care?



Very little data collected on women aged 55-59 years

27 questions on HIV/AIDS were included in a country with <100 confirmed cases since 1988.

Older women were asked different questions, precluding comparisons across the life course.

Questions in the PFHS 2010

Screening questions for breast and uterine cancer included only women 30-54 years old excluding older women

Questions for women aged 15-54 focused on pregnancy, childbirth and family planning, and ignored other health issues (eg: mental, occupational and non-reproductive health).

Never-married women excluded from questions on genito-urinary tract, menstrual problems, and barriers to healthcare access..

Interpretation

- The PFHS is an important source of data.
- However, such population surveys are constructed and implemented with the support of international agencies, and are necessarily restricted by available local resources.
- We need a better understanding and dialogue about the scope and content of such surveys if we are to better understand the health of everyone, irrespective of their age or marital status.
- Internationally comparable health surveys need to take into account the health situation of specific settings whilst retaining the ability to monitor international health targets.