Promoting hospital-based smoking cessation services at major Swiss hospitals: a before and after study

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Questions under study: Whether a 1-year nationwide, government supported programme is effective in significantly increasing the number of smoking cessation clinics at major Swiss hospitals as well as providing basic training for the staff running them.

Methods: We conducted a baseline evaluation of hospital services for smoking cessation, hypertension, and obesity by web search and telephone contact followed by personal visits between October 2005 and January 2006 of 44 major public hospitals in the 26 cantons of Switzerland; we compared the number of active smoking cessation services and trained personnel between baseline to 1 year after starting the programme including a training workshop for doctors and nurses from all hospitals as well as two further follow-up visits.

Results: At baseline 9 (21%) hospitals had active smoking cessation services, whereas 43 (98%) and 42 (96%) offered medical services for hypertension and obesity respectively. Hospital directors and heads of Internal Medicine of 43 hospitals were interested in offering some form of help to smokers provided they received outside support, primarily funding to get started or to continue. At two identical workshops, 100 health professionals (27 in Lausanne, 73 in Zurich) were trained for one day. After the programme, 22 (50%) hospitals had an active smoking cessation service staffed with at least 1 trained doctor and 1 nurse.

Conclusion: A one-year, government-supported national intervention resulted in a substantial increase in the number of hospitals allocating trained staff and offering smoking cessation services to smokers. Compared to the offer for hypertension and obesity this offer is still insufficient.

Key words: smoking cessation; hospital-based programs

Introduction

In Western countries the importance of diseases due to lifestyle is rapidly increasing and smoking is considered the most important preventable cause of death and disease [1]. In Switzerland medical services for some well-known risk factors such as hypertension and obesity are well established both in community practices and in public hospitals. However, hospital based smoking cessation services are lagging behind. The social and political context is currently rapidly changing with new legislation on tobacco products and protection from passive smoking. Several European countries like Ireland [2, 3] and Italy [4] have successfully adopted laws restricting smoking in public places. Swiss legislation is lagging behind these countries as both advertising for tobacco products and smoking in public places such as restaurants is still legal in almost all cantons. However, the social and political climate is now changing, highlighted by the recent successful introduction of encouraging measures to protect the public from exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. For example, all Swiss trains became smoke-free in December 2005 [5], and in early 2006 the population of the canton of Ticino accepted by a landslide majority of 79% a law to

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ban smoking in public places with effect from 2007 [6]. In this context hospital administrators feel pressurised to declare their institutions smoke-free in the near future, but so far most hospitals have only limited smoking to certain well defined areas, and most of them still sell cigarettes. Hospitals also feel the ethical need to offer smoking cessation counselling during their stay to alleviate smokers’ withdrawal and to help implementation of smoking restrictions.

Further, hospital based smoking cessation programmes are effective in decreasing smoking prevalence [7–9] and, most recently, have been shown to reduce mortality in high-risk smokers with cardiovascular disease [9]. The objectives of the study were 1) to assess the number of existing hospital-based smoking cessation services and compare it to the offer for hypertension and obesity, 2) to motivate for implementation of smoking cessation services, 3) to provide basic training for smoking cessation counsellors, and 4) to compare number of active sites and personnel trained by the programme in all major Swiss hospitals after one year.

Methods

The project entitled Hospital Quit Support (HQS) was planned by a working group comprising experts from academic, governmental and non-governmental institutions involved in tobacco control in Switzerland in 2004. The project was planned under the auspices of the Swiss Association for Smoking Prevention (Arbeitsgemeinschaft fuer Tabakprävention = AT) as an extension of the existing official activities in tobacco control, and was approved by the tobacco prevention fund of the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health in July 2005.

Target group

We targeted all major hospitals defined as teaching institutions offering three years of postgraduate training in Internal Medicine. This choice was based on the assumption that a majority of doctors interested in smoking cessation would be in these departments, and that a period of at least three years would favour training of physicians and involvement in a smoking cessation service. A total of 39 hospitals in 21 cantons were chosen on these criteria. As Switzerland is a federal nation, it was felt that every canton should be represented; therefore we also included the largest hospital in the 5 cantons without a hospital satisfying above criteria. Finally, we targeted a total of 44 hospitals for this intervention (fig. 1). The schedule of the entire project is summarised in the flow sheet of figure 2.

Existing services

From August to September 2005 we assessed the existing services in these hospitals for three important risk factors – hypertension, obesity, and smoking – using a web search and a telephone call to the hospital switchboard. Each web site was searched to find whether counselling for smokers and/or smoking cessation was offered by the hospital. Many web sites had information on the health effects of smoking, but if counselling was not specifically mentioned this did not count. At the phone call the receptionist was asked the same question for each of the three risk factors evaluated, namely: is there an official offer at your hospital for people with high blood pressure, overweight/obese people, and smokers. The receptionist could either answer her- or himself or pass the caller on until someone could confidently answer the question. All web searches and phone calls were made by the project leader (CTB).

Intervention

Subsequently, we sent an official letter to the director and the head of the department of Internal Medicine to request a personal visit by the study leader and co-leader. The visit aimed to provide feedback from the web and telephone survey and present the planned intervention to establish new or support existing smoking cessation services at their hospital. All 44 hospitals agreed and were vis-

Figure 1
Swiss map indicating the location of the 44 target hospitals.
Results

At baseline, there were only 9 (21%) active smoking cessation services in the 44 hospitals, compared to 43 (98%) and 42 (96%) established programmes for managing hypertension and obesity, respectively (table 1). Telephone receptionists provided the same information as the site visit in...
Table 1
Offer of medical services for smoking cessation, hypertension, and obesity in 44 Swiss hospitals at baseline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Web search</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Site visit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>6/44 (14%)</td>
<td>10/44 (21%)</td>
<td>9/44 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>19/44 (43%)</td>
<td>43/44 (98%)</td>
<td>41/44 (98%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obesity</td>
<td>29/44 (66%)</td>
<td>42/44 (96%)</td>
<td>42/44 (96%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

all except 1 hospital, where the smoking cessation service was in the planning stage only. The web search yielded lower figures with only 6 (14%), 19 (43%), and 29 (66%) of hospital websites showing information on services for smoking cessation, hypertension, and obesity respectively. Each director was given a hospital specific feedback about the quality of their web site. For the 6 sites mentioning smoking cessation the information was difficult to find, but even for hypertension and obesity the majority of sites were of poor quality. Suggestions for improvement were made to all directors.

Discussion

Our study showed that a government-supported one-year intervention was associated with a highly significant increase in the number of major Swiss hospitals offering smoking cessation counselling to hospitalised smokers. The increase from 21% to 50% of the target hospitals is remarkable considering the fact that at the outset most all hospital administrations were doubtful about the feasibility of institutionalised hospital-based smoking cessation services mainly for reasons of lack of funding for the required personnel and fear of competition with the community doctors. This increase in smoking cessation services is, however, still insufficient in comparison to the results of an earlier survey published in 2002 looking at the same offer at 102 US hospitals, of which 30% and 47% indicated the existence of smoking cessation clinics on their web sites and by telephone contact respectively [11].

The Swiss situation is not unique in Europe, where generally the availability of hospital based smoking cessation is clearly lower than in the USA [10, 12].

We think that the success of our programme was due to three concurrent factors. First, the intervention was resource intensive, the study leader (CTB) and co-leader (XvB) devoting 75% and 10–20% of their time respectively [11].

Second, the project was incorporated into the activities of the national coordination office (AT) and funded by the tobacco prevention fund of the Swiss Office for Public Health providing the necessary political and financial support. The third factor was fortuitous and unknown at the time of the study planning, namely the rapidly changing social and political climate concerning tobacco control in Switzerland, exemplified by the implementation of smoke-free trains and adoption of a
law banning smoking in public places in Ticino. These events precipitated a wave of public debate on the topic and we believe that it had a major impact on hospital administrators’ opinions as well.

A limitation of our study is the absence of data about the quality and effectiveness of smoking cessation counselling for hospitalised smokers. In 2007 all the 13 new cessation clinics were at the beginning of a learning curve and needed continued academic and financial support. We therefore planned a two-year follow-up to the HQS project which was accepted in October 2007 (for details see: www.bag.admin.ch/qa/haqs/prevention: projects). The objectives of this follow-up project in brief were to further increase the number of active sites, to evaluate the quality of the service provided and to guarantee sustainability of the smoking cessation clinics. To achieve this, the following six aims were defined:

1) addition of at least 8 new hospital-based smoking cessation clinics, bringing the total to at least 30 active sites out of the 44 target hospitals.
2) the six largest sites with the longest experience should act as centres of competence for the smaller hospitals in their vicinity; these centres should ensure that “best practice” guidelines in smoking cessation are implemented at each site.
3) counsellors trained in 2006 as well as new ones should receive further training in national workshops and through short training periods at their centres of competence.
4) each hospital-based smoking cessation clinic should identify counsellors in private practice who will continue patient support after discharge from hospital.
5) all active hospital-based clinics as well as the referral system in private practice should be posted on the web site of AT (www.at-schweiz.ch) and thus be available to the public, and
6) all active hospitals should implement measures of sustainability of their smoking cessation offer for the period after the HQS project. All clinics active at the end of December 2006 and committed to continue throughout the follow-up period should receive SFr. 20,000.– as incentive. Further financing should come out of hospitals budgets.

All clinics will document the number of patients counselled, smoking cessation treatment chosen, and the treatment success rates on a standardised HQS data capture sheet, which will have to be submitted to HQS for quality control purposes.

The ultimate aim of HQS is to have smoking cessation clinics at all target hospitals, as is the case for services to patients with hypertension and obesity.

In conclusion, our study showed that a government-supported intervention significantly increased the number of major Swiss hospitals offering smoking cessation counselling to hospitalised smokers in a period of a rapidly changing social and political climate concerning tobacco control. As various other European countries currently experience similar changes, such a programme to increase hospital based help for smokers might be successfully repeated elsewhere.

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