

Partnering with *parteras*: assessment of learning in a multi-collaborator international training programme for traditional birth attendants in Oaxaca, Mexico



M Alexandra Friedman, Dana R Gossett, Isabello Saucedo, Shayna Weiner, Mimi W Young, Nicholas Penco, Jessica Evert

Abstract

Background Since 2013 medical students from Northwestern University (Chicago, IL, USA) have delivered a training programme for traditional birth attendants (*parteras*) in Oaxaca, Mexico. These training sessions are a collaboration between a US-based non-governmental organisation, Child and Family Health International (CFHI), local health-care workers, and the Mexican Ministry of Health. Barriers such as illiteracy, innumeracy, and non-traditional learning styles complicate the training of traditional birth attendants. Here, we evaluate the effectiveness of a verbally administered assessment to determine the effect of the Northwestern University programme on *parteras*' self-reported knowledge and skills

Methods First-year and third-year US medical students, in collaboration with local health officials and CFHI, held a 4-day training programme for 32 *parteras* from rural Oaxaca. Training encompassed educational objectives from the Mexican Ministry of Health. Exercises included discussion, call and response, role-plays, and simulation of birth attendance. Evaluation included oral pre-test and post-test self-reported knowledge and task-specific ability related to the 12 programme-specific categories, as demarcated by participants using a written pictorial scale. Student and staff observations were recorded.

Findings Participants were receptive to the curriculum and the US medical students as teachers. Many *parteras* were illiterate, innumerate, and unfamiliar with the term "confidence". For this reason, questions were modified to assess perceived knowledge and skill. Participants reported increased knowledge and skill in all topics except nutrition and postpartum care, with significant improvement noted in five of 12 categories. *Parteras* were reluctant to apply lessons on evaluation and management of postpartum haemorrhage because of concerns about delaying referral.

Interpretation Medical students can lead successful training programmes for lay health workers, such as traditional birth attendants, when working with a facilitating local organisation and local health practitioners. Use of verbally administered assessments could overcome issues of literacy, numeracy, and cultural constructs that hamper evaluation of participants' learning in such programmes. Successful training programmes will require local health officials to empower and encourage trained birth attendants to use new information.

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Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

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Departments of Obstetrics and Gynecology (D Gossett MD), and Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine (S Weiner MPH), Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, Chicago, IL, USA

(M Friedman MD, M Young MD); Brown University, Women & Infants Hospital, Providence, RI, USA (M Friedman); Child and Family Health International Affiliate, San Pedro Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Codigo, Mexico (I Saucedo MD); Child Family Health International San Francisco, CA, USA (N Penco); and University of California, San Francisco, Department of Family and Community Medicine San Francisco, CA, USA (J Evert MD)

Correspondence to:

Alex Friedman, Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, 303 East Superior Street, Chicago, IL 60611, USA
mafriedman88@gmail.com