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Factors associated with public health nutrition intervention failure: A qualitative study of ‘practice wisdom’

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The need for intelligence to support decisions relating to nutrition intervention design, prioritisation and population group targeting is one of the persistent challenges of public health nutrition practice. The tendency for publication bias towards interventions with evidence of intervention success limits practitioner access to intelligence about intervention failures, increasing the probability that mistakes are repeated in practice. The current dearth of intervention research that is accessible and relevant to local intervention planning supports the need to explore the lessons learnt, but not published, by practitioners in the process of developing, implementing and evaluating interventions. This study utilised semi-structured interviews to qualitatively explore the experience of public health practitioners, health promotion officers and health professionals with experience in community-based interventions targeting nutrition and physical activity promotion. Australian-based practitioners were approached to participate in interviews based on contact details identified on intervention reports sourced from web-searches and the literature, complemented by snow-ball sampling. A total of 13 practitioners were interviewed, audio-recorded and resulting transcripts were content analysed and categorised into key response themes using a pre-determined inquiry logic. Practitioners demonstrated considerable insights (practice wisdom) about intervention failure. The key features of unsuccessful interventions as reported by reflective practitioners included an over reliance on educational strategies, having unrealistic and uninformed expectations and relying on normative data at the expense of engaging community perspectives. The need for dissemination of practice wisdom as a contribution to the public health nutrition intelligence base is required to enhance the quality and effectiveness of public health nutrition practice.