

Living Together with Chronic Disease: Informal Support for Diabetes Management in Vietnam (VALID I; 2018-2024)

Project summary

The VALID project is a research partnership between Thai Binh University of Medicine and Pharmacy and the Universities of Copenhagen and Southern Denmark. In the project's first phase (VALID I), the research included a pilot intervention which combined peer support groups (diabetes clubs) with educational classes to support people living with diabetes. The study was conducted in two rural communes in Thai Binh province, Vietnam. It aimed to develop innovative models of care that actively involve informal caregivers and to generate knowledge of how NCDs, such as type 2 diabetes, are embedded in everyday social interactions.

Context

Vietnam faces a double burden of communicable diseases and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). While NCD prevalence is rapidly increasing, the national healthcare system remains oriented mainly towards the prevention and treatment of communicable diseases. This has led to serious gaps in primary-level NCD prevention and care, rendering it difficult for PLWNCDs to access appropriate treatment services and obtain support for daily disease management. Recognising that informal caregivers constitute important members of the primary healthcare workforce, the VALID I project aimed to generate new knowledge about the role of informal support in everyday disease management, while also piloting a community-based peer support intervention.

Peer support intervention

WHY (objectives)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> To improve diabetes self-care (psychological/behavioural) To create a space for mutual social support (social) To decrease stigma around the disease (psychological/social) To improve clinical indicators (clinical)
WHO	Village health workers and club facilitators (club moderators and participants in classes)
WHAT	9 topics (one per month, aligned with classes)
HOW	1 open, group-based club per village (10-40 participants)
WHERE	In-person at the village meeting hall
WHEN	Every 2 weeks for 9 months

Intervention description

The VALID I intervention comprised two parallel elements: diabetes clubs and expert-led classes. In each participating community, around nine clubs (one per village) and one centralised class were established. These clubs operated as open peer support groups, welcoming individuals to join at any time, assuming they met the inclusion criteria (i.e., those over 40 living with type 2 diabetes). Over the nine-month intervention, each month was dedicated to a specific topic, maintaining a consistent structure: 1) an initial club meeting offered general information, distributed leaflets and encouraged questions; 2) classes were attended by two village health workers and two club facilitators per club (jointly referred to as club moderators) to gain knowledge from topical experts and clarify the collected questions; and 3) a follow-up club session where the answers were shared with peers and which provided the basis for activities fostering peer learning and mutual support. Between sessions, a Vietnam-specific social networking application (Zalo) was used to communicate with peers. Moderators were trained before the start of the intervention and received a small remuneration.

Selected lessons learned

- **Moderator role:** During the initial implementation period, the project team noticed that some club moderators (i.e., village health workers and club facilitators) seemed to see themselves as teachers rather than facilitators (e.g., giving lectures, providing solutions). Finding their way into their new role may have proven challenging for moderators, as none of them had previous experience of running peer support sessions. To address this challenge, the project team arranged two re-training sessions to build on the original moderator training and strengthen facilitation skills.
- **Participant attendance:** The village health workers noticed that many peers found it difficult to regularly attend sessions. The reasons varied, including work or private commitments, lack of energy, not seeing the importance of sessions due to an absence of diabetes complications and old age/mobility problems. To address this challenge, the village health workers visited participants' homes to discuss the importance of attending and remind them of upcoming sessions.

- **Sustainability:** After the initial nine-month intervention period, the moderators and participants were eager to continue. The project team therefore decided to design new materials to guide a one-year extension of the clubs. These consisted of nine instructional videos exploring topics in more depth. The videos provided information as well as follow-along exercises, such as physical activity with a dumbbell. The clubs used the materials as part of self-organised sessions and continued beyond the 21-month period. Their continuity, as well as the project scale-up, may prove challenging, as moderator salaries are linked to the study project funding.

To learn more about the case study, explore the [study website](#), which contains policy briefs, publications, and the intervention manual and its table of contents (in Vietnamese). See also the [VALID II Facebook page](#) for the instructional videos produced for the clubs.

This case study was informed by internal project documents and developed jointly with Tine Mette Gammeltoft (University of Copenhagen) and Đặng Thị Ngọc Anh (Thai Binh University of Medicine and Pharmacy)