

ABSTRACT

Introduction

Sri Lanka faces triple malnutrition, impacting health and beyond. The SERVQUAL model is a global standard for evaluating healthcare service quality. Nuwaraeliya district consistently reports the highest rates of underweight and stunting in children under five nationwide. Assessing the quality of nutritional services in the local communities can reveal challenges and barriers in meeting national objectives.

Objective

To describe the service quality of nutrition services delivered to children under five in the Nuwaraeliya district.

Method

A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out in two phases. Initially, 29 items related to Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy were identified through expert opinion and literature review as primary service quality dimensions. One interviewer administered questionnaire for clients with expectation and perception measurements, two separate self-administered questionnaires with perception measures for managerial staff and PHMs were used. The study sample included 35 managers who were selected through purposive sampling, all PHMs with over one year of service experience (n=249) , and 600 clients (mothers or guardians) selected through multi-stage cluster sampling with the population proportionate to size method. Upon obtaining the ethical approval

second phase carried out with the data collection from three study populations. Data analysis was conducted using EPI-Info and SPSS V26 (2018).

Results

Clients reported a negative service quality gap across all five primary dimensions (Mean=-0.34; SD=0.41), largest gap in the Tangibles and Reliability domains. Service quality perceptions were influenced by clients' ethnicity, income, and occupation. The mean score for managerial perceptions was the lowest (Mean=3.62; SD=0.37). PHMs' perceptions closely aligned with clients in reliability and responsiveness dimensions but differed significantly in others. Clients generally had higher perception levels than managers and PHMs. Tangibles and Empathy dimensions had the lowest mean scores across all groups. Neither PHMs' nor managers' perceptions were significantly associated with socio-demographic or service-related characteristics.

Conclusions and recommendations

The identified negative service quality gap indicates that clients' expectations are unfulfilled during service delivery. Perceptions of service delivery differ significantly among stakeholders. Tangibles and empathy are the key areas to be addressed. Client and multi-stakeholder engagement for planning, supportive supervision, and in-service training for PHMs, addressing staff shortages, continuous monitoring, and feedback mechanisms, will help to bridge the identified negative service quality gap.

Key words: Nutrition, Service, Quality, SERVQUAL