

Health Centres – Help when needed?



In 2013, the Offices of the County Governors carried out countrywide supervision of services provided by health centres to children aged 0-6 years. They examined services in health centres in 78 municipalities and urban districts, and found one or more breaches of the regulations in 56 of these services. We present the main findings in this article.

Inadequate programme for examination of children in the health centres

The national guideline for health centres, produced by the Norwegian Helsedirektoratet (IS-1154), recommends a programme for health checks for children aged 0-6 years, and specifies the types of examination the children should be given, and when.

The recommendations are based on the time when children should reach different stages in their development.

The Offices of the County Governors found that in many municipalities the programme had been reduced, or that several checks had been combined, without making an adequate assessment of the consequences, and without implementing adequate compensatory measures. Often, the justification given for the changes was lack of resources.

Today, mothers and their babies are discharged from maternity units soon after the birth.

Children are dependent on adults taking care of them and ensuring that they have favourable conditions in which to grow up. Health centres play a central role in promoting health, and have a unique area of contact with groups of children that other services do not reach. Nearly all children attend the health centre from birth, where their physical, social and mental development is examined using standard methods. In this way, the health centre can detect early signs of maladjustment, lack of care, and developmental abnormalities, and implement measures, or refer children to other services. The health centre also has an important task to support adults in their role as parents.



The mother and baby should be followed up during the first two weeks after they come home. In order to detect problems with nutrition and bonding between the mother and baby, it is important to observe them together, preferably in the home. Therefore, the guidelines recommend that the mother should be visited at home within the first two weeks. We found that this service is not offered in many municipalities. In some places only a telephone contact was offered during the holiday period, or when the level of staffing was low. In other places, home visits were only offered to mothers with a first baby, or to families at high risk.

Giving children a check-up when they start school shall ensure that they receive help with problems that can lead to learning difficulties.

In many places, these check-ups were not carried out until the children were well into their first or second year at school. Hearing tests, which should have been carried out at the age of four or when the child started school, were not carried out until later. The child may then have lost important time with teaching, social interaction and integration. When the time between check-ups gets longer, the risk increases that abnormal development and reduced quality of life are not detected early.

Inadequate records

Sound practice demands keeping up-to-date and comprehensive records, and that necessary information is exchanged between the health centre, general practitioners, and hospitals.

In many municipalities, the way in which records were kept varied, and they were often incomplete. Records were sometimes kept in different places, for example at the doctor's clinic, without the health centre receiving a copy. Case histories and letters were not always scanned, but kept as sheets of paper. Paper records and electronic records were not always coordinated. The result could be that important information was not available, and that the person who assessed the child and instigated measures did not have the whole picture.

In some municipalities, parts of the records were shredded, making it difficult for new health personnel to get a full overview of the child's development. This is in breach of the regulations relating to patient records.

Inadequate privacy protection

Health centres have responsibility for ensuring the privacy protection of the child and family.

In several places, information about the health and private life of the parents was recorded in the child's records.

This also applied to information that was not directly relevant for the health

and care of the child. Such information may be available to the child when the child comes of age. Such practice is in breach of privacy protection for the family and child.

Lack of qualified interpreters

Children and parents have the right to receive information in a language that they understand. Misunderstanding as a result of language difficulties and unqualified interpreters can have serious consequences for the health and development of the child.

We found that many health centres used members of the family, friends and other people as interpreters. It is then not certain that important information is correctly understood.

Information may be distorted, and the mother may refrain from asking questions that she would have asked if she was alone with the health personnel and an interpreter with a duty of confidentiality. Private persons who do not have a duty of confidentiality may get information that they should not have about relatives and friends.

Clients were not asked about their experience of the service

Dialogue and cooperation between parents and health personnel is important in order to develop good services and in order to build mutual trust. The supervision team found that there were very few municipalities in which clients were asked about their experiences, and in which this information was used for planning and assessing the quality of services in health centres. In some municipalities and urban districts, client surveys had been carried out once or several times. In other places, the clients had never been asked about their experiences.

The Offices of the County Governors and the patient ombudsman receive few complaints about the services

provided by health centres. One reason may be that parents do not know that they can complain about preventive services.

Lack of management of the services provided by health centres

In order to manage and improve the services, managers in the municipalities need to be familiar with the services and they need to receive regular reports. In many of the supervision reports, lack of planning and management of services provided by health services is described. In some municipalities, regular meetings are held at different levels. Some health centres report throughout the year at regular intervals. But in others, the budget and accounts and (perhaps) the annual report are the only regular forms of communication between the



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municipal leadership and the health centres. The supervision team found that the health personnel often failed to report deficiencies in the services, and that if they did report, the reports were not assessed or

followed up. When this is the case, health personnel stop reporting after a while.

Health centres: help when needed?

It is very important for the health and development of the child to deal with problems early. Otherwise there is a great risk that developmental disorders, illness and unfavourable conditions are not detected. The health centre is a cornerstone in preventive health. This countrywide supervision detected inadequacies in the services, or the risk of inadequacies occurring, in the majority of the municipalities that were investigated. This provides a good basis for working to improve the services.