NIHR | Applied Research Collaboration

Impact Inclusion Innovation Investment

Sickness to prevention

Tackling cancer inequalities in Muslim communities

ARC East of England

The challenge
Bowel cancer is the fourth most common cancer in the UK and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths. Early detection greatly improves survival, making screening essential. Yet uptake remains low in some ethnic minority groups, particularly South Asian Muslim communities, where cultural, religious, and trust-related barriers reduce participation. Screening rates are around 28% lower in South Asian communities than in the general population, contributing to later diagnoses and poorer outcomes.

The approach
Researchers from the ARC East of England, in partnership with the British Islamic Medical Association, explored how culturally and religiously tailored bowel cancer screening intervention delivered in mosques by clinicians from the same community can enhance bowel cancer symptom awareness, increase screening participation, and improve health outcomes.

The outcomes and impact
The intervention was found to be both acceptable and accessible, leading to consistent improvements in participants' understanding of bowel cancer symptoms, their intention to take part in screenings, and actual screening uptake. Intention to screen rose from 68% before the intervention to 90% afterwards, including among participants who had never previously taken part in bowel cancer screening. A 2-year follow-up using NHS cancer screening hub data showed improved screening uptake among intervention participants, highlighting the potential for long-term behaviour change.

The study showed that community-delivered, culturally tailored approaches like these can overcome barriers to screening, boost early diagnosis and save lives.

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