

Solutions and Recommendations for the Rural Population to Access Health Care



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Abstract

Access to health care is a problem for the rural population. Without proper access to health care and preventative health education, people experience greater health risks and suffer more from chronic disease. Effective leadership and collaborative strategies must be developed and implemented to help improve health care access. There is significant research on this problem, but more specific research methods should be explored with a systems perspective and the development of a strategic plan. Developing effective solutions and providing solutions are necessary for the ethical delivery of health care to the rural population. The rural population faces many problems when it comes to health care and the delivery of health care services. Without proper access to health care and preventative health education, people experience greater health risks and suffer more from chronic disease. There are several reasons the rural population suffer more from the lack of appropriate care than the urban population.

The Problem of Access to Health Care

The rural population faces a major health problem of access to health care. Their geographic location and environment influence the health status of this population Smith et al. [1]. People living in rural communities are more isolated and must travel greater distances to reach a clinic or hospital than the urban population. The rural population exhibit higher rates of morbidity and mortality because of the greater travel distances to hospitals or clinics, more severe injuries, and fewer available health care resources. Rural hospitals and clinics are often understaffed because many health care professionals seek better opportunities in the urban areas. The rural hospitals and clinics also lack the financial resources to support appropriate equipment for effective diagnosing and treatment. This lack of properly trained staff and appropriate diagnostic tools leads to detrimental situations.

Another problem associated with the rural population is their health illiteracy. In order to make appropriate changes and live a healthier life people must become health literate. They must develop an understanding of their health information to make appropriate health decisions and improve their clinical outcomes Zahnd et al. [2]. Rural people tend to be more health illiterate because of factors such as being older, less educated, poorer, and lack access to health care. Therefore, education must be targeted to help people make healthier choices. People

must be educated on the appropriate healthy behaviors to change the risky behaviors that will reduce chronic disease and improve health. The major challenges of geographic isolation, transportation problems, economic instability, health care provider shortages, lack of appropriate funding, resource limitations, and lack of health education are just a few factors that make rural health care difficult La Brems et al. [3].

Action Research Methodologies in the Delivery of Health Care

Many rural areas are experiencing a demographic change such as an influx of migrant farm workers that bring new challenges. Injuries and complications of diseases specific to this population impact the rural hospitals with more complexity of illnesses and the challenge of providing health services to people that are not able to pay for services. Another challenge is understanding the culture of the people and communicating in a way to gain their trust to achieve desirable healthy outcomes. Action research studies must be undertaken to better understand the barriers that exist to limit access to health care. Paul Longo & Veronica Donahue [4] presented findings from their action research that identified barriers the Hispanic community in rural Nelson County, Virginia faced that brought the development of better outreach services and health literacy programs to improve the health of this population. They also identified that health care

providers must become more sensitive to the different cultures of the community.

Action research studies that identify the inequalities in health care access and seek to reduce inequalities in health and health care access in rural communities are also very important Haddad et al. [5]. Innovative strategies that coordinate efforts and funding from government agencies, universities, and other support groups are imperative for social and health improvement to this vulnerable population. The commitment of time is necessary to ensure success by allowing for a sustained social change.

Leadership and Collaborative Strategies to Improve Health Care Access

An assessment of the health condition of the population is necessary to understand their problems and develop an effective action plan to improve their health. The assessment of health is a systematic method to identify unmet health needs of a population and make the necessary changes to meet those needs Wright et. [6]. Making the assessment to better understand the population's unmet needs, strategies can then be developed with an action plan to meet these needs. A few strategies should include educational strategies to improve the understanding and necessary skill development for the health professionals and public health teams to face the challenges of these initiatives. The professionals must be committed and willing to collaborate with several entities. The most profound results will be obtained with community engagement and diverse community stakeholders occupying key roles in the development of this health initiative Barnett [7]. Developing such a diverse and multidisciplinary team of community members from the business sector, the health sector, and the public health sector will establish a better infrastructure with ongoing engagement and a better perception from the population being served. Coordinating efforts across institutional boundaries helps overcome negative perceptions and lack of trust. Lastly, the assessment and planning must be clearly defined with each stakeholder being involved to help determine the appropriate criteria in prioritizing the many needs of the community. Developing partnerships and collaborations are essential to improve the health of the rural community. Establishing community university partnerships are an effective approach to improving the fragmented rural health service delivery systems. Such a partnership is vital to improve coordination, reduce expensive redundancies, and enhance the health deliver process while advocating for policy reform and delivering innovative services.

Evaluation and Assessment of Recommended Solutions with Systems Perspective

The problem of health care access has been attributed much to geography, lack of insurance, and lack of health literacy. Focusing on these attributes can lead to developing solutions to this major problem. Solutions to the health disparities will rely

on the communities having a patient centered care approach. William Frist [8] suggested that the best way to eliminate health disparities was to improve the quality of care delivered to every patient through dignity and empowerment. The health care providers must educate their patients, but the patients must become personally responsible and take ownership of their chronic health conditions before improvement in health can be achieved. Involving the community in developing partnerships with universities or other such agencies will improve rural health and rural health services. The Rural Embedded Assistants for Community Health (REACH) is one example that demonstrated the effectiveness of partnerships to identify, implement, and evaluate innovative health strategies deliver by local health care workers Brown et al. [9]. The success of any program are determined by trust, coordination and sustainability.

Communication must be improved between the health care providers and their patients in order for any education to be effective. Sharing the knowledge in terms the patients understand will raise the patients' health literacy. This communication must also be tailored to the cultural beliefs and differences to be effective. The disparities in access to health care are largely due to the lack of quality in health care. Therefore, intervening strategies must include improving the quality of health care, expanding access to quality health care, strengthen the national coordination efforts, and develop more diverse health care education and research Frist [8]. Improving the quality of health care involves the development of an integrated health information system. An information system where data can be stored, quickly obtained, and shared amongst health care professionals will provide better health outcomes for the patients. The quality of health must also utilize a standardized measurement of performance. Any improvement cannot be measured without some form of measuring system. Quality indicators currently exist, but are not established as a national standard. Specific quality measures must be established that can be used by all health care providers to encourage providers in promoting innovative clinical designs for an improved health care system.

Implementing these strategies to improve health care quality will take much effort from national leadership. A strong leader is needed to close this health care gap and to be able to engage and leverage all the national health care agencies to work together more uniformly. Focusing on a common goal of quality health care for all Americans will produce a much healthier nation. All strategies must incorporate a method of evaluation and assessment of its effectiveness. Goals must be established that can be clearly identified and measured. Evaluation of a program or intervention effectiveness is easily obtained with clear measurable objectives.

Ethical Principles in the Distribution of Resources

Public health must consider the best interests of the population it serves. This objective is much easier to accomplish

in urban areas with abundant resources, but difficult in rural areas where the resources are scarce. Public health in rural areas must deal with a special close-knit dynamic that exists in the rural communities. Health departments in rural communities usually have a small professional staff and extremely limited financial budget because of the low tax revenue Warren & Smalley [10]. The lack of personnel and financial resources makes the practice of rural public health more challenging than in the urban areas.

The fact that the health care provider is a family member, friend, or neighbor can threaten patient confidentiality because of the very diffuse professional-client boundaries that exists in rural communities. For example, it is difficult for a health care provider to protect patient privacy in a clinic where neighbors, friends, and relatives work. It is also difficult to maintain a professional physician-patient relationship when the patient is a former school teacher or a member of the local church Warren & Smalley [10]. Providing health care to family, friends, and neighbors is necessary in the rural setting and reduces the separation and professional boundaries that can be seen in the urban environment. This type of situation can also become very difficult when the patient is suffering from a condition with an associated stigma such as a sexually transmittable disease. Not only would the public health professional know the patient, but they would also know the sexual partner or partners. These are just a few of the special ethical considerations that are unique to the rural health care providers because of the close-knit and tightly interdependent small community.

The rural health care providers are often faced with moral dilemmas and sometime must provide services that are beyond the scope of their professional training. The local physician is expected to be the expert in all fields of medicine because the lack of specialists Warren & Smalley [10]. In rural hospitals with very few physicians, the physicians must often rotate and perform various services such as working the emergency room, taking care of pediatric patients, medical/surgical patients, and geriatric patients. This pushes the boundaries of the professional training that they received. As the field of public health continues to grow, the focus must go beyond just the concerns of infectious disease to include other services such as mother-child health, chronic diseases, and mental health. The primary focus of public health has been on the urban population that has not included all geographic locations Warren & Smalley [10]. A more holistic population approach is needed to bring public health to all people. Until this can happen, disparity in health care delivery

will remain with the rural population suffering the most from the lack of health care services.

Conclusion

Access to health care is a problem for the rural population. Effective leadership and collaborative strategies must be developed and implemented to help improve health care access. There is significant research on this problem, but more specific research methods should be explored with a systems perspective and the development of a strategic plan. Developing effective solutions and providing solutions are necessary for the ethical delivery of health care to the rural population. Providing access to health care and preventative health programs to the rural population through effective delivery of health care services is important to improve public health.

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