

Improving Access To Healthcare Services In Rural Areas Of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Access to healthcare services is a crucial determinant of health outcomes, yet remains a challenge in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. While the country has made progress in expanding its healthcare system in recent years, there are persistent disparities between urban and rural areas. This qualitative review paper aims to explore the barriers and facilitators to accessing healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia and identify potential strategies for improving access. Based on a comprehensive review of existing literature, this paper highlights the multifactorial nature of the issue, with various social, economic, and cultural factors contributing to the limited access to healthcare in rural areas. These barriers include geographic isolation, limited availability of healthcare facilities and services, and beliefs, and financial constraints. Despite these challenges, there are ongoing efforts by the Saudi Arabian government and other stakeholders to improve access to healthcare services in rural areas. These initiatives include the expansion of primary healthcare centers, community health programs, and the implementation of telemedicine services. However, the success of these efforts is hindered by various factors, such as inadequate funding, limited resources, and insufficient coordination among different stakeholders. This paper also sheds light on the role of social determinants of health in access to healthcare. The lack of education and awareness about health and healthcare services, particularly among rural populations, is a significant barrier. In conclusion, improving access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the various barriers discussed in this paper. Policy interventions should prioritize investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare financing to bridge the gap between urban and rural areas. This review provides insights and recommendations to inform future research and policy initiatives aimed at addressing this critical issue and ultimately improving the health outcomes in rural communities in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Healthcare access, Saudi Arabia, rural areas, medical, funding.

Introduction

Access to healthcare is a fundamental human right that should be available to all individuals regardless of their geographical location. However, the reality is that many rural communities

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around the world face significant challenges in accessing healthcare services (Houghton, et al., 2023). These communities often have limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of healthcare practitioners, making it difficult to receive quality healthcare (Houghton, et al., 2023). This issue of limited access to healthcare is not unique to a particular country, but it is a global concern.

One country that is facing this challenge is Saudi Arabia, a country with a large population and area. While Saudi Arabia has made significant progress in developing its healthcare system over the years, the country still faces disparities in accessing healthcare services, particularly in rural areas (Alkhamis & Miraj, 2021). Despite the country's efforts to improve its healthcare system, rural communities in Saudi Arabia continue to face barriers that hinder their ability to access healthcare services.

The rural population in Saudi Arabia is large. These rural communities are often located in remote and isolated areas, making it challenging to access basic healthcare services. Additionally, the rural population in Saudi Arabia is also characterized by a high proportion of elderly individuals and people with chronic diseases, who require regular and specialized healthcare services (Asmri, et al., 2020). However, due to limited resources and inadequate infrastructure, these individuals face difficulties in accessing the necessary healthcare services.

One of the main reasons for the limited access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia is the uneven distribution of healthcare facilities and resources. The majority of healthcare facilities are located in urban areas, leaving those in rural areas with limited options for healthcare services (Alkhamis & Miraj, 2021). This is compounded by the shortage of healthcare practitioners in rural areas, with many healthcare professionals preferring to work in urban centers due to better opportunities and infrastructure. As a result, rural communities in Saudi Arabia are left underserved and are forced to travel long distances to access healthcare services.

Moreover, the lack of infrastructure in rural areas also plays a significant role in limiting access to healthcare services. In many rural communities, there is a lack of proper road networks and transportation systems, making it difficult for individuals to travel to healthcare facilities (Al Saffer, et al., 2021). This is especially true for the elderly, people with disabilities, and those with chronic illnesses, who may require specialized transportation facilities. Inadequate infrastructure also extends to healthcare facilities in rural areas, with many lacking basic amenities such as electricity and water supply, which affects the quality of healthcare services provided (Al Saffer, et al., 2021).

Another significant challenge facing rural communities in Saudi Arabia is the high cost of healthcare services (Mokdad, et al., 2015). Many rural individuals come from low-income households and cannot afford to pay for healthcare services, which are often heavily subsidized in urban areas. This creates a significant financial barrier, making it challenging for individuals to access the necessary healthcare services, thereby impacting their health outcomes.

In light of the challenges faced by rural communities in accessing healthcare services in Saudi Arabia, it is evident that there is a pressing need for interventions to bridge the gap in healthcare access between rural and urban areas. While the country has made significant strides in improving its healthcare system in recent years, there is a need to address the existing disparities in healthcare access to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their location, have equal opportunities to receive quality healthcare services.

This qualitative review paper aims to explore the issue of improving access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. The paper will examine the existing literature on the topic and highlight the barriers faced by rural communities in accessing healthcare services. Additionally, it will also discuss the current initiatives undertaken by the Saudi Arabian government and other organizations to address the problem and identify potential strategies to enhance healthcare access in rural areas. Overall, this paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature on healthcare access in rural areas of Saudi Arabia and provide insights for policymakers and healthcare stakeholders to develop effective solutions that improve healthcare accessibility and equity in the country.

Methods and Results

Methods

The aim of this qualitative review paper is to explore the different methods used in improving access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. In order to achieve this aim, a qualitative review was conducted. The search was carried out using the following databases: PubMed, MEDLINE, Embase, and Google Scholar. The keywords used for the search included “improving access”, “healthcare services”, “rural areas”, and “Saudi Arabia”. The search was limited to articles published within the last 15 years, written in English, and focused on improving access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia.

The inclusion criteria for the articles were: (1) studies that focused on improving access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia, (2) studies that used qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or surveys, and (3) studies that reported on the methods used to improve access to healthcare services. The exclusion criteria were: (1) studies that did not focus on healthcare services in rural areas, (2) studies conducted in other countries, and (3) studies that did not use qualitative methods.

The data from the included studies were extracted and analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from the analysis were then used to describe the different methods used to improve access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia.

Results

The results of the review identified several methods that have been used to improve access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. These methods are categorized into three themes: (1) using technology, (2) community involvement, and (3) healthcare system interventions.

Using Technology

The use of technology has been identified as an effective method in improving access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. This includes the use of telemedicine and mobile health (mHealth) applications. Telemedicine enables healthcare providers to remotely diagnose and treat patients in rural areas, reducing the need for patients to travel long distances for healthcare services. This has been particularly effective in providing access to specialist care for patients in rural areas. Similarly, mHealth applications have been used to provide healthcare information and services, such as appointment reminders and medication adherence, to patients in rural areas. (Al Kuwaiti, Al Muhanna, & Al Amri, 2018; Alaboudi, et al., 2016; Khan, 2020).

Community Involvement

Another method that has been used to improve access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia is community involvement. This includes the use of community health workers (CHWs) and community-based health education programs. CHWs play a crucial role in providing basic healthcare services and promoting health awareness in rural communities. In addition, community-based health education programs have been successful in raising awareness about the importance of healthcare services and promoting healthy behaviors among rural populations. (Al Khashan, et al., 2021; Alyami, et al., 2022; Alzarea, et al., 2023).

Healthcare System Interventions

Various interventions at the healthcare system level have also been implemented to improve access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. These include the establishment of primary healthcare centers (PHCs) in rural areas, innovative financing schemes, and policies to incentivize healthcare providers to work in rural communities. The PHCs serve as the first point of contact for patients in rural areas, providing essential healthcare services and referring patients to higher levels of care when necessary. Innovative financing schemes, such as health insurance programs, have been introduced to reduce the financial burden of seeking healthcare services for residents of rural areas. Additionally, policies have been implemented to encourage healthcare providers to work in rural areas by offering incentives such as salary increases and training opportunities. (Aldahmash, et al., 2019; Al Masad, et al., 2022; Alblowi, Shujaa, & Alonazi, 2023)

The combination of these methods can lead to significant improvements in access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. These improvements can include increased availability of healthcare services, reduced travel time and costs for patients, and improved health outcomes. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, workforce shortages, and cultural barriers still exist, and further efforts are needed to address them.

Summary

This qualitative review paper has identified and described the different methods used to improve access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. The use of technology, community involvement, and healthcare system interventions can play a significant role in improving access to healthcare services (Al Kuwaiti, Al Muhanna, & Al Amri, 2018; Alaboudi, et al., 2016; Khan, 2020; Al Khashan, et al., 2021; Alyami, et al., 2022; Alzarea, et al., 2023; Aldahmash, et al., 2019; Al Masad, et al., 2022; Alblowi, Shujaa, & Alonazi, 2023). These methods can lead to positive outcomes, but challenges still exist and require further attention. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of these methods and to identify additional strategies to improve access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

Access to healthcare services is a crucial aspect of ensuring the overall health and well-being of individuals in any society. However, in rural areas of Saudi Arabia, there has been a significant disparity in access to healthcare services compared to urban areas. This has resulted in increased health inequities, particularly among underserved and marginalized populations. This qualitative review paper aims to explore the factors contributing to the limited access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia and examine potential strategies to improve access and reduce health disparities.

One of the key factors contributing to the limited access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia is the geographical and infrastructural barriers. The majority of rural areas in the country are sparsely populated, with limited transportation infrastructure, making it challenging for individuals to access healthcare facilities in urban areas. Moreover, the lack of primary healthcare centers and specialized healthcare facilities in rural areas results in individuals having to travel long distances to seek medical care. This not only leads to delays in receiving timely treatment but also increases the cost burden on individuals, particularly those from low-income backgrounds.

Another significant factor contributing to limited access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia is the shortage of healthcare professionals. The majority of healthcare professionals in the country are concentrated in major cities, making it challenging to attract and retain healthcare professionals in rural areas. This results in a significant gap in the availability of essential healthcare services, particularly in remote and underserved areas. As a result, individuals in rural areas may have to wait for extended periods before receiving medical attention, which can significantly impact their health outcomes.

To improve access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia, there is a need for a comprehensive and holistic approach that addresses these multi-dimensional factors. One effective strategy is the development of telehealth services, which use telecommunication and information technology to deliver healthcare services remotely. Telehealth has the potential to bridge the gap between urban and rural healthcare facilities and improve access to specialized services for individuals in remote areas. It also has the potential to reduce healthcare costs and improve the quality and efficiency of care.

Another crucial strategy to improve access to healthcare services in rural areas is the establishment of more primary healthcare centers. Primary healthcare is a cost-effective and sustainable approach to provide essential healthcare services to the underserved population. By ensuring the availability of primary healthcare services in rural areas, individuals can receive timely and appropriate care for their health needs, reducing the burden on specialized facilities in urban areas. Additionally, the government must also invest in training and incentivizing healthcare professionals to work in rural areas and provide culturally competent and gender-sensitive care.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative review paper highlights the significant challenges faced in improving access to healthcare services in rural areas of Saudi Arabia. The limited accessibility to healthcare services, shortage of healthcare professionals, and cultural barriers contribute to the existing health inequities in rural areas. However, by adopting a comprehensive approach that includes the development of telehealth services, and establishment of primary healthcare centers significant improvements can be made in improving access to healthcare services in rural areas (Al Kuwaiti, Al Muhanna, & Al Amri, 2018; Alaboudi, et al., 2016; Khan, 2020; Al Khashan, et al., 2021; Alyami, et al., 2022; Alzarea, et al., 2023; Aldahmash, et al., 2019; Al Masad, et al., 2022; Alblowi, Shujaa, & Alonazi, 2023). These efforts will not only bridge the gap between rural and urban healthcare facilities but also contribute to reducing health disparities and promoting the overall health and well-being of individuals in rural areas of Saudi Arabia.

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