

Healthcare Access Disparities Among Seniors
A Research Paper by the All4Smiles Research Team
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Abstract

It is no surprise that as we get older, our immune system becomes weaker, our joints become more brittle, our minds become less elastic—to put it simply, our overall health is not as it used to be. Therefore, it is essential that our elderly are properly taken care of; that involves ensuring that they receive the healthcare they need quickly and effectively. However, there are several barriers that prevent that from happening. In this research paper, our team will look into socioeconomic barriers, language barriers, disparities in mental health services, and current government support programs to examine why this issue is still occurring and what is being done to ameliorate it.

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Socioeconomic Barriers to Senior Healthcare

By: Joyce Sato

As we age, we become more susceptible to health-related issues, making us more reliant on good quality healthcare services provided. We find that many seniors have trouble finding affordable healthcare services they feel that they can trust. Good treatment and health-maintenance is becoming increasingly more available; however, there are still barriers and challenges that separate seniors in the quality of healthcare they receive. These barriers typically fall under the category of either environmental factors, or financial challenges.

The seniors that are not located in the city oftentimes face challenges in finding the right healthcare provider for their needs and treatments. This is even more of an issue when the use of a specialist is needed. Additionally, living in an environment that is senior-friendly means that there must be space for them to safely and comfortably go on walks or have access to regular physical activity, which has proven to boost overall health of all age groups.

Studies have found that around 1 in 10 older adults live in poverty; meaning that they cannot afford the necessities of life- safe housing, healthy foods, and sufficient healthcare services. In a study including seniors at the age of 65 or above, about 29% reported that they skip needed healthcare because they can't afford it. 14% claimed to be in medical debt, and 89% reported that they don't think they would be able to pay all of their medical bills within the next year. Food and cost of living also play a role in the lives of seniors, who have mentioned that it is more important to have the two most essential necessities of life, than it is to have regular healthcare services provided.

Geographical Barriers to Senior Health Access

By: Evelyn Yao

Unfortunately, the present hosts a variety of barriers to healthcare access for the elderly. Chief among these barriers are geographic barriers, especially concerning rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Transportation and street safety also played roles in preventing seniors from accessing healthcare. For seniors who are already less agile than their younger counterparts, in areas with limited transportation, it can be near impossible to travel to the closest hospital or clinic.

In rural communities, seniors have to travel by bus or car to the nearest clinic, which can take several hours. The difficulty of procuring a ride and the long time spent traveling deter many from seeking treatment at the expense of their health. Additionally, the travel could be a burden of time, money, and time spent away from work for seniors. According to Rural Health Information Hub, “In urban areas, public transit is generally an option for patients to get to medical appointments; however, these transportation services are often lacking in rural areas. Rural communities often have more elderly residents who have chronic conditions requiring multiple visits to outpatient healthcare facilities. This becomes challenging without available public or private transportation.” For seniors who constantly have to travel for health visits, the significant amount of resources spent on these clinical visits bar some from pursuing treatment, exacerbating the disparity between rural and urban communities.

Additionally, a rise in the need for home health services emphasizes the difficulty that seniors in rural areas face. Home health care is a less expensive option where one can receive care in their own home. A recent survey reports that 10.3% of all rural ZIP Code Tabulation Areas were not served by a home health agency (Rural Health Information Hub). Frontier and

remote areas are the least served by home health agencies. Many seniors in these areas are unable to receive care because of the expensive money and time spent on traveling to urban clinics and the large geographical distance preventing home health agencies from treating them.

Finally, broadband access affects telehealth services, which is rising in popularity. Many areas, especially rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, suffer slow Internet speeds and a lack of access to Internet, preventing access to telehealth. The percentage of people in nonmetropolitan areas who lacked Internet connection was nearly double the percentage of people in metropolitan areas (Rural Health Information Hub). Telehealth is a great option for seniors, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, to easily check in with their physicians for frequent updates. However, geographic barriers can prolong even this distance by alluding to a lack of broadband access and yet another obstacle for seniors to cross.

Overall, due to the significant geographic barriers leading to a lack of access to healthcare, the seniors must suffer for this discrepancy. Rural communities are scattered with unmet healthcare needs, due to a lack of screening and preventative services because of the large distance to the nearest clinic. Because of the exhaustive amount of resources (time, money) that must be spent on receiving treatment, many seniors forgo treatment altogether and contribute to a growing problem of health issues in communities. It is essential for more local health initiatives to expand their reach to rural communities and to challenge health disparities.

Cultural and Language Barriers to Senior Health Access

By: Ifra Iyoob

When discussing how to properly provide healthcare to elders, age is the most obvious factor to consider. However, the mention of cultural and language differences are equally important, but often left out of the conversation. This should not be the case as one's belief system and ability to converse, both of which are essential to a proper provider-patient relationship, are determined by their heritage and the language they speak. Diversity is a beautiful concept, but it can make for a more strenuous relationship between healthcare provider and patient, even making access to care completely unattainable.

Why exactly is taking into account an elder's culture and language important? Well, a patient's culture and heritage often affect whether they seek health care in the first place, the way they understand medical information, and how they make healthcare decisions. Only if healthcare providers recognize these differences and understand them in the context of healthcare can they provide the most effective treatments for their patients.

Some elders may come off as extremely skeptical to Western medical practices, especially if they grew up being taught that homemade treatments and procedures rooted in religious and cultural history are superior. This can make them more ignorant to doctor recommendations and more frustrating to deal with when it comes to professional suggestions and recommendations.

While it may be easy to become angry and dismissive, it is important to brush these annoyances aside out of concern for what is best for the patient. A healthcare provider's job is to make their patient feel comfortable and treat them with respect, even if that is not always reciprocated enthusiastically.

When dealing with a patient that is not of the same background, either racially or ethnically, it is important to attempt to understand that community. Recognizing health, social, and environmental injustices they face can lend a greater understanding into why that individual may be skeptical or hesitating when it comes to medical care. For instance, Black individuals who have heard about the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and unsolicited pelvic exams on Black women throughout their lives will most likely take longer to trust their provider.

In addition, it is important to note that Eastern cultures are much more collective than the individualistic American mindset. Therefore, their family may be even more involved in an individual's health decisions than a provider may expect. It is essential to be understanding of that and actively aid patients as they try to relay decisions among their family members.

Differences in language can also inhibit the quality of medical care and whether individuals who do not speak English very well or at all even seek out care. As such, it is important to make said patients feel comfortable and understood as they receive treatment.

One great tool for overcoming language barriers is providing language assistance. It is important for healthcare facilities to identify the main languages spoken by their patient population and ensure that patients are matched with qualified bilingual staff whenever possible. Noting a patient's primary language should be one of the first questions asked when scheduling appointments. Going even further, medical centers should keep important written materials in patient's preferred languages. For instance, office signage, intake and consent forms, prescription labels, and patient instructions should be available in multiple languages whenever possible.

Even if a patient can understand English to an extent, they probably will not be able to easily understand medical terminology. Therefore, it is crucial that medical providers take into consideration the educational backgrounds of their patients. So, limiting medical jargon and

simplifying language is an essential step to take. Another objective to take note of is use of slang and non-verbal motions. For other cultures, slang and hand gestures can mean different things—they may even be offensive. Healthcare providers should recognize this and limit hand motions and use of slang to a minimum or eliminate them entirely.

Understanding how culture and language can impact access to healthcare is essential to providing quality treatment to all. Culture and language already permeate every aspect of our lives, including our medical system. The sooner we recognize that, the sooner we can make our healthcare system more equitable and considerate of our increasingly diverse population.

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