

## Health Care Access in Rural Communities: A Review Article

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### ABSTRACT

There are significant challenges facing rural communities in the United States and around the world. The ability to understand these limitations for access to healthcare can help us plan and implement strategies to improve healthcare in underserved communities. In this article, we will review the issues facing rural areas to access medical treatments and possible options to increase and improve access to care.

**Keywords:** Health care, Rural, Medicine

### INTRODUCTION

It is well understood that access to health care in rural areas may require patients to travel significant distances to reach primary care or emergency services.<sup>[1]</sup> There are approximately 20 percent of Americans and 43 percent throughout the world that live in rural areas.<sup>[2]</sup> In the US, only 10 percent of physicians practice in rural settings. This number will be changing with an increased population and shortage that is being experienced for newly graduating primary care physicians. It is also shown that there is even further shortage in trained sub-specialty physician availability in rural communities.<sup>[3]</sup> Decreasing access to medical professionals and facilities leads to a population that does not seek care early. In rural settings, about half of admissions are patients 65 years and older with more compromised untreated chronic diseases.<sup>[4]</sup> There are social factors such as rural poverty, lack of funds and need to work which further complicates attempts at seeking care in rural areas. Average distances to travel to a hospital can range about 11 miles.<sup>[5]</sup>

Indigenous tribes living in rural areas are just one example of such communities. Studies have shown that Native Americans have significantly reduced access to health care. The combination of many factors such as distance to health care facilities, medical issues such as mental health, infections have led to lower life expectancy and higher prevalence of health conditions in this group of patients.<sup>[6]</sup>

### DISCUSSION

Rural areas require more attention to increase healthcare access. The need for primary care, behavior and mental health care, emergency care and dental professional care are areas to consider improving in rural communities.

Only then, we could provide disease prevention, detection, diagnosis, and treatment for better quality of life and improved life expectancy. However, this is dampened by multiple barriers to care. One includes financial restriction and ability to pay for services. There is more uninsured population in rural areas.<sup>[7]</sup> This prevents the cohort of the population from seeking early care. The second issue at hand is access with transportation to distant health care locations. Finally, the ability to communicate with medical professionals, and trust their services is another issue faced when dealing with rural populations. It also showed that rural communities have more elderly patients with more chronic disease that has been neglected.<sup>[8]</sup>

Other factors are poor health literacy. It is essential that patients understand the importance of seeking health care early. Emphasis on prevention could reduce health care budgets necessary to provide care in rural areas. Low level of literacy has been shown to frustrate an individual to communicate with their provider and understand the instructions given. One example of such a problem is the instruction on how to follow insulin regimen in diabetic patients. Poor communication could lead to complications if diabetic patients do not understand the instructions. This affects how patients seek medical advice in the first place. It may also affect their ability to navigate the system to get the care they need.

It is essential for providers to also understand the dynamics of living in rural areas. Smaller communities may make patients uneasy to seek certain care such as mental health, substance abuse, sexual dysfunction and other needs. They may be concerned that their neighbors or family may find out about certain medical conditions they are grappling with and be hesitant to seek help.

It is well documented that other shortages such as hospice care, mental health service and substance abuse services are in significant shortage in rural areas. Communities deal with these issues internally without seeking any assistance. Reproductive and preventative and neonatal care may be nonexistent or so far away that may make seeking those services impossible. Another area is dental care and prevention.

Majority of patients in rural communities seek dental care when in pain leading to loss of teeth and no preventative treatments. There are limited insurance providers to cover such care. Poor oral health leads to an overall effect on patient health status in rural communities.

**Solution:**

There are many factors contributing to these shortages in rural communities. One being the shortage of providers from physicians, dentists, nurses, and other axillary health care professionals in general. There is a significant need to train more providers and encourage them to reach rural communities. Some of the ideas currently being implemented includes opening professional schools in rural communities to attract students that will in future stay in the communities. Second being acceptance and recruitment of students from rural regions in hope that they will eventually return to their roots and practice as such. Also, providing incentives such as tuition coverage to encourage students to practice in areas of need in exchange for financial and tuition

assistance. There are also more residencies being established and offered in rural areas in the hope to attract trained specialties in rural communities.

Another option that has gotten momentum is the use of telehealth. The ability to communicate with primary care providers and specialists remotely is the future of healthcare. Covid-19 accelerated telehealth medicine exponentially. Many facilities, doctors and insurance companies have an underlying foundation now to provide telehealth care. It is essential however to make sure that rural communities have access to the internet and computers to be able to remotely access health care professionals. This would be a starting point for patients in rural areas. Treatments such as preventative, educational and follow up care can reduce the need of in person visit. Other care such as mental health services, substance abuse care, prenatal care and more can be done remotely as well to reduce need for transportation.

Patients' needs however may require the presence of health care providers. One idea being looked at is free standing emergency facilities that provide care independent of hospitals. This allows more hands-on care for rural areas without a big investment in facility and hospital development. Other ideas could be to train midlevel health care liaisons that provide some hands-on basic care under supervision of a physician to take care of patients in remote areas. Finally, with development of technology, these facilities may be able to provide some surgical care remotely by use of medical robots. This idea is being investigated to improve access to care without the specialist being present. Military is presently investigating this options in battlefield.<sup>[9]</sup>

All these options require financial support from our government. We as citizens need to encourage our politicians to consider allocation of funds to improve health care in our most needed rural communities.

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