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The role of public hospitals in providing free healthcare services: Enhancing accessibility and promoting positive health outcomes for communities

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Abstract--Background: Public hospitals play a pivotal role in providing free healthcare services, especially in low- and middle-income communities. These institutions are fundamental to ensuring equitable healthcare access, reducing health disparities, and promoting positive health outcomes. Despite their critical role, public hospitals face numerous challenges, including resource constraints, overcrowding, and the increasing burden of non-communicable diseases. **Aim:** This paper aims to explore the role of public hospitals in delivering free healthcare services, assess their impact on healthcare accessibility and community health outcomes, and identify challenges and strategies for enhancing their efficiency and effectiveness. **Methods:** A mixed-methods approach was utilized, combining quantitative analysis of patient data from public hospitals with qualitative insights drawn from case studies and policy reviews. Data sources included government reports, patient satisfaction surveys, and academic literature on public healthcare systems. **Results:** Findings indicate that public hospitals significantly improve healthcare accessibility, particularly for underserved populations. Quantitative data reveal increased patient admissions and improved health outcomes, while qualitative analysis highlights the role of public hospitals in reducing financial barriers and fostering health equity. However, systemic challenges such as funding shortages, staff shortages, and infrastructural deficits hinder their efficiency and quality of care. **Conclusion:** Public hospitals are indispensable to achieving universal healthcare coverage and reducing health disparities. Addressing their challenges requires strategic investments, policy reforms, and innovative approaches to healthcare delivery. These steps will not only improve the functionality of public hospitals but also ensure better health outcomes for the communities they serve.

Keywords--public hospitals, free healthcare, accessibility, health equity, community health outcomes.

Introduction

Since they are the main source of free healthcare services in low- and middle-income nations, public hospitals are crucial pillars of healthcare systems. These organizations are distinguished by their dedication to universal accessibility, frequently functioning under public sector or governmental sponsorships to guarantee fair healthcare delivery to groups that might not otherwise have access to medical treatment. Public hospitals are medical facilities that are funded and run by the government or public monies in order to offer complete medical care without charging patients directly [1]. They provide services to a variety of demographics, frequently focusing on resolving health disparities and serving underserved or underprivileged populations.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of public hospitals in the larger context of public health. A pillar of the World Health Organization's goal for global

health, universal health coverage (UHC) is embodied by public hospitals, which are rooted in frameworks of social justice and fairness [2]. It has been demonstrated that making free healthcare services available improves population health outcomes, lessens health inequities, and promotes economic stability in local areas [3]. By ensuring that diagnostics, treatments, and vaccines are widely accessible, public hospitals also play a vital role in addressing public health emergencies, including pandemics [4]. Despite their significance, these organizations continue to confront obstacles such as a lack of staff, a lack of resources, and increased demands brought on by the combined burden of non-communicable and communicable diseases [5].

Recent events highlight the difficulties public hospitals confront in today's healthcare environments as well as their changing function. First, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed flaws in healthcare financing and infrastructure, underscoring the critical role public hospitals play in responding to major health emergencies [6, 7]. Second, new developments in digital health technologies, such as electronic health records and telemedicine, are starting to change how public hospitals provide services, increasing access to underserved people and increasing efficiency [8]. Third, since public hospitals depend more and more on creative financial models, such as public-private partnerships, to close financing gaps, the necessity for sustainable finance mechanisms is becoming more widely acknowledged [9]. These patterns point to a changing and intricate environment that calls for constant study and legislative actions.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the various ways that public hospitals contribute to the provision of free medical treatment as well as the wider ramifications for public health systems. It starts with a summary of public hospitals' history and development across time, then looks at how they affect healthcare equity and accessibility. Before going over possible solutions, like technological advancements and legislative changes, the study examines the difficulties public hospitals confront, such as staffing shortages, resource limitations, and infrastructure shortcomings. In order to guarantee equitable and sustainable healthcare delivery, the study ends with suggestions for improving public hospitals.

The Historical Evolution of Public Hospitals

Public hospitals have long been integral to the advancement of healthcare systems worldwide. These institutions serve as the backbone of healthcare provision in many nations, ensuring that underserved and marginalized populations receive essential medical services. Their evolution is marked by historical, social, and political developments that have shaped their role, structure, and scope over time. Understanding the historical trajectory of public hospitals reveals how they became pivotal in addressing health inequities and adapting to emerging health challenges.

The origins of public hospitals can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where healthcare was often a communal or religious responsibility. Early examples include temple-based care in ancient Egypt and Greece, where priests provided rudimentary medical treatments to the sick. Similarly, during the Roman Empire,

"valetudinaria" were established to care for soldiers, representing one of the earliest institutionalized forms of healthcare. These early models were not public hospitals in the modern sense but set a precedent for the societal obligation to provide care for specific groups [10]. Over centuries, religious institutions such as monasteries became central to healthcare provision, particularly in medieval Europe. These institutions, often supported by charitable donations, provided care for the sick and destitute, laying the groundwork for the charitable ethos that continues to define public hospitals today [11].

The transition from religious to secular management of hospitals began in the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. During these eras, advances in medicine and public health sparked interest in institutionalized care. Governments and municipalities started to play a more active role in funding and managing hospitals, particularly in response to growing urbanization and the spread of infectious diseases. By the 18th century, public hospitals began to emerge as state-run institutions aimed at addressing the health needs of the poor. For instance, the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris and the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh served as pioneering examples of public hospitals that integrated medical care, teaching, and research [12]. These institutions laid the foundation for the modern concept of public hospitals as centers for both healthcare delivery and medical education.



Figure 1. Public Hospital

The industrial revolution of the 19th century brought about significant shifts in healthcare needs and delivery. Rapid urbanization and industrialization led to overcrowded living conditions, poor sanitation, and the proliferation of infectious diseases. Public hospitals were increasingly seen as essential infrastructure to address these public health crises. Governments began to establish more hospitals, often funded by taxes, to provide care to growing urban populations. During this time, the role of hospitals expanded beyond merely treating the sick to include preventive measures such as vaccination campaigns and health education [13]. Advances in medical science, such as the discovery of anesthesia and antiseptics, further transformed public hospitals into hubs of technological and scientific progress.

The 20th century marked a critical turning point in the evolution of public hospitals, as the concept of universal healthcare gained traction. Influenced by social reform movements and the aftermath of global conflicts, many nations recognized the need for comprehensive healthcare systems that included public hospitals as a central component. In the United Kingdom, for example, the establishment of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948 institutionalized the principle of free healthcare at the point of service. This model was replicated in various forms across the world, from Scandinavia to developing nations, where

public hospitals became the primary providers of care for the masses [14]. The mid-20th century also saw the rise of public health programs focused on maternal and child health, infectious disease control, and chronic disease management, further embedding public hospitals into the broader healthcare framework.

During the latter half of the 20th century, the focus on health equity and social determinants of health brought renewed attention to the role of public hospitals. The Alma-Ata Declaration of 1978, which emphasized primary healthcare as a fundamental human right, reinforced the importance of public hospitals in achieving health for all. In response, governments and international organizations invested in expanding public hospital infrastructure, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). However, disparities in funding and resources often resulted in uneven quality and accessibility of care, highlighting the persistent challenges facing public hospitals [15].

In the 21st century, public hospitals have faced both unprecedented challenges and opportunities. The global burden of disease has shifted from infectious diseases to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer. This epidemiological transition has placed new demands on public hospitals, requiring them to adapt their services and infrastructures to address chronic and long-term care needs. For instance, many public hospitals have developed specialized units for oncology, cardiology, and geriatrics, reflecting the growing complexity of healthcare delivery [16]. Additionally, advancements in technology, such as telemedicine and electronic health records, have enabled public hospitals to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance patient outcomes. These innovations have been particularly beneficial in LMICs, where public hospitals often serve as the primary healthcare providers for rural and remote populations [17].

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical role of public hospitals in global health security. During the pandemic, public hospitals were at the forefront of diagnosing, treating, and managing patients with COVID-19, often under severe resource constraints. The crisis revealed both the strengths and vulnerabilities of public hospital systems. On one hand, the ability of public hospitals to rapidly scale up services, such as intensive care units and vaccination programs, demonstrated their resilience and adaptability. On the other hand, the pandemic exposed longstanding issues such as underfunding, workforce shortages, and inadequate infrastructure, which hindered their capacity to respond effectively to surging healthcare demands [18].

Despite these challenges, the pandemic has also provided a unique opportunity to reimagine the role of public hospitals. Policymakers and healthcare leaders have recognized the need for sustainable investments in public hospital systems to ensure their preparedness for future health emergencies. This includes strengthening supply chains for essential medicines and equipment, increasing funding for research and innovation, and expanding training programs for healthcare workers. Furthermore, there is growing advocacy for integrating public hospitals into broader health systems that emphasize primary and community-based care. Such integration aims to create a continuum of care that addresses

both acute and preventive health needs, reducing the burden on public hospitals and improving overall health outcomes [19].

In conclusion, the historical evolution of public hospitals reflects a continuous interplay between societal needs, medical advancements, and public policy. From their origins in religious and charitable institutions to their current role as cornerstones of healthcare systems, public hospitals have adapted to meet the changing demands of societies. As the global health landscape continues to evolve, public hospitals must navigate complex challenges while seizing opportunities for innovation and improvement. Their ability to deliver equitable, accessible, and high-quality care will remain central to achieving health for all, reaffirming their indispensable role in public health systems.

Accessibility and Health Equity

In public health and healthcare systems around the world, accessibility and health equity are essential tenets. They stand for the combined objectives of eliminating inequalities in health outcomes across various populations and guaranteeing that people have the chance to access essential health services without encountering financial, geographic, or social obstacles. These ideas are especially important when discussing public hospitals, which are frequently portrayed as essential tools for attaining universal health coverage (UHC) and advancing just healthcare systems. Public hospitals play a vital role in closing access gaps and lowering disparities because of their unique position to serve communities that might otherwise encounter systemic barriers to healthcare.

The availability, acceptability, cost, and geographic reach of health services are all aspects of the multifaceted concept of healthcare accessibility. By offering free or subsidized healthcare, public hospitals frequently exemplify these qualities by lowering the financial obstacles that disproportionately impact low-income people and marginalized populations. Given that out-of-pocket costs have been repeatedly connected to untreated illnesses, delays in seeking care, and catastrophic health expenditures among economically disadvantaged groups, affordability is arguably the most concrete component of accessibility that public hospitals address [20]. Public hospitals are able to serve disadvantaged populations, such as the elderly, children, and those with chronic illnesses, since they are not restricted by budgetary constraints. This improves access to critical health services for everybody.

Another important factor is geographic accessibility, which describes how close medical facilities are to the communities they serve. In order to serve the medical needs of a wide range of populations, public hospitals are frequently positioned strategically in both urban and rural locations, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Nonetheless, there are still issues in guaranteeing a fair regional distribution. Due to insufficient infrastructure, such as inadequate transportation systems and inadequate healthcare infrastructure, public hospitals are usually inaccessible to rural and isolated areas. These obstacles exacerbate already-existing disparities by delaying care-seeking behaviors and resulting in poor health outcomes for rural populations [21]. Governments and legislators have been concentrating more on extending the reach of public

hospitals through telemedicine programs, mobile clinics, and collaborations with community health professionals in order to address these issues.

The fair distribution of health resources and results among populations, regardless of socioeconomic position, geographic location, or other social determinants of health, is known as health equality. It is strongly related to accessibility. By putting the needs of underprivileged and marginalized groups first, public hospitals are leading the charge to address health disparities. This dedication is in line with the social justice paradigm, which holds that everyone should have the chance to reach their best possible level of health and forms the basis of many public health programs [22]. Public hospitals directly combat the unequal distribution of health resources and lessen the effects of social determinants of health, like poverty, education, and employment, which are known to have a substantial impact on health outcomes, by providing free healthcare services.

Reducing the differences in disease burden and health outcomes between various population groups is one of the most important facets of health equality that public hospitals address. According to studies, diseases, both communicable and non-communicable, frequently disproportionately affect marginalized communities. For example, those with low incomes are more likely to have higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic illnesses, in part because they have less access to early diagnosis and preventative care [23]. Public hospitals are essential to correcting these trends because they offer easily accessible and reasonably priced treatment. In vulnerable groups, preventive care services including immunization programs, health screenings, and maternity and child health treatments have a particularly significant impact on lowering disease prevalence and mortality rates.

Public hospitals have a part in advancing health equity through lobbying and policy influence in addition to service delivery. These organizations frequently serve as evidence-based forums for pointing out health disparities and promoting structural adjustments to rectify them. Targeted interventions and resource allocation to underserved areas, for instance, can be informed by data gathered from public hospitals on patient demographics, disease prevalence, and treatment outcomes. Furthermore, in order to address more general social determinants of health, such housing, education, and nutrition, which are inextricably linked to health equity, public hospitals usually work with community organizations, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies [24].

Even though they play a vital role, public hospitals struggle to provide the best possible accessibility and health equity. Lack of resources, such as inadequate money, a paucity of personnel, and antiquated infrastructure, frequently makes it difficult for them to offer all populations high-quality care. In LMICs, where public hospitals usually face extreme financial strains and rely significantly on outside assistance or government subsidies, these difficulties are especially noticeable. Additionally, public hospital systems around the world are under stress due to the growing burden of non-communicable diseases and the continuous threat of pandemics, underscoring the need for long-term investments and creative solutions [25]. A multidimensional strategy that incorporates public-private

partnerships, more government financing, and technological integration to improve efficiency and service delivery is needed to address these issues.

New developments in telemedicine and digital health have shown promise in enhancing public hospitals' accessibility and health equity. For instance, telemedicine has made it possible for patients in underserved and rural areas to obtain diagnostic tests and specialist consultations without having to travel. The COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the value of remote healthcare delivery in preserving access to necessary treatments while lowering the risk of infection, has been a particularly revolutionary time for this technology [26]. In a similar vein, data analytics and electronic health records have improved public hospitals' ability to effectively address disparities by streamlining operations, tracking patient outcomes, and spotting health trends.

Furthermore, it has been shown that integrating community-based health programs with public hospitals is a successful way to increase accessibility and health equity. Community health workers are essential in teaching communities about health services, coordinating referrals, and offering basic medical care because they act as a liaison between the local community and public hospitals. In addition to expanding public hospitals' reach, these programs increase underprivileged communities' trust and engagement, increasing the likelihood that they will seek care when necessary [27]. In rural and low-resource areas, these community-based strategies have proven especially effective in reducing infectious disease outbreaks and addressing mother and child health inequities.

In order to assist public hospitals in accomplishing these objectives, the policy environment pertaining to accessibility and health equity has also changed. Prioritizing health equity has been made a worldwide mandate by international frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 3, which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for everyone. These pledges have been converted by national governments into laws that improve service delivery, fortify public hospital systems, and address socioeconomic determinants of health. To guarantee that public hospitals are prepared to carry out their mandate, strong governance frameworks, accountability systems, and active stakeholder involvement are necessary for the successful implementation of these policies [28].

Since public hospitals are essential to attaining universal health coverage and minimizing health disparities, accessibility and health equity are at the heart of their mission. Public hospitals guarantee that vulnerable populations receive the care they require by tackling social, economic, and geographic barriers to healthcare. This promotes a more fair allocation of health resources and results. But in order to accomplish these objectives, public hospitals must address enduring issues including staffing shortages, resource limitations, and infrastructure deficiencies. There are encouraging opportunities to improve the accessibility and fairness of public hospital services through technological advancements, community-based programs, and supporting legislative frameworks. Public hospitals must continue to lead the charge in developing inclusive, equitable health systems that ensure no one is left behind as healthcare systems change.

Financial and Economic Impacts

The financial and economic dimensions of public hospitals are critical in shaping their functionality and their broader role within national healthcare systems. Public hospitals, as pivotal providers of free or subsidized healthcare, operate within complex economic frameworks that influence their ability to deliver accessible, high-quality care. These institutions not only incur direct costs associated with service provision but also contribute significantly to societal well-being and economic productivity by improving public health outcomes. However, the financial sustainability of public hospitals remains a contentious issue, with resource constraints, rising healthcare costs, and evolving demands creating substantial challenges.

One of the most significant economic contributions of public hospitals is their role in mitigating the financial burden of healthcare on individuals and families. By offering free or subsidized services, public hospitals reduce out-of-pocket expenditures, which are a leading cause of catastrophic health spending, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) [29]. This financial protection is particularly crucial for marginalized populations who often lack access to alternative healthcare options. Studies have shown that individuals relying on public hospitals are less likely to experience economic hardships due to medical expenses, which, in turn, contributes to poverty alleviation and economic stability [30]. This protective function aligns with the broader goals of universal health coverage (UHC), which seeks to ensure that healthcare is both accessible and affordable for all.

The economic impact of public hospitals extends beyond individual financial protection to encompass broader societal benefits. Healthy populations are more productive, contributing to economic growth through increased workforce participation and reduced absenteeism. Public hospitals play a key role in this dynamic by addressing both preventive and curative health needs, thereby improving population health and reducing the long-term economic costs associated with untreated illnesses [31]. For example, vaccination programs and maternal and child health services provided by public hospitals have been shown to yield high returns on investment by reducing mortality rates and enhancing human capital development. These benefits are particularly evident in LMICs, where the economic gains from improved public health can be transformative.

Despite their significant societal contributions, public hospitals face persistent financial challenges that threaten their sustainability and efficiency. One of the primary issues is the rising cost of healthcare services, driven by factors such as advancements in medical technology, the growing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and the increasing demand for specialized care. These trends have placed immense pressure on public hospital budgets, often necessitating difficult trade-offs between expanding service provision and maintaining quality [32]. In many cases, public hospitals are forced to operate with limited resources, leading to overcrowding, staff shortages, and delayed treatments, all of which undermine their effectiveness.

The reliance of public hospitals on government funding is another critical factor influencing their financial viability. In most countries, public hospitals are funded through tax revenues or government allocations, which are subject to economic fluctuations and competing budgetary priorities. During periods of economic downturn, public hospital budgets are often among the first to be cut, exacerbating existing resource constraints [33]. Additionally, in LMICs, where government revenues are typically lower, public hospitals frequently depend on external aid or donor funding, which can be unpredictable and insufficient to meet growing healthcare demands. These funding challenges underscore the need for innovative financial strategies to ensure the sustainability of public hospitals.

One such strategy is the adoption of public-private partnerships (PPPs), which have gained prominence as a means of addressing resource gaps in public healthcare systems. PPPs involve collaborations between public hospitals and private entities to share resources, expertise, and risks in the delivery of healthcare services. For example, private sector involvement in infrastructure development, equipment procurement, and service management has enabled many public hospitals to improve their efficiency and expand their capacity [34]. However, the implementation of PPPs requires careful oversight to ensure that the focus on profitability does not compromise the equity and accessibility objectives of public hospitals.

Another promising approach is the integration of health financing mechanisms such as social health insurance and performance-based funding. Social health insurance schemes pool resources from individuals, employers, and governments to finance healthcare services, reducing the reliance on out-of-pocket payments and direct government funding. Performance-based funding, on the other hand, ties financial allocations to specific outcomes or benchmarks, incentivizing public hospitals to improve their efficiency and quality of care [35]. These mechanisms have been successfully implemented in various contexts to enhance the financial sustainability of public hospitals while maintaining their commitment to equity and accessibility.

The economic impact of public hospitals also extends to their role as major employers and drivers of local economic activity. Public hospitals are often among the largest employers in their communities, providing jobs for healthcare professionals, administrative staff, and support personnel. The salaries and wages paid by public hospitals contribute to local economies through household spending and tax revenues. Additionally, public hospitals generate demand for goods and services from local suppliers, including medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, and food services, further stimulating economic activity [36]. These economic linkages highlight the broader significance of public hospitals as engines of local development.

However, the financial challenges facing public hospitals have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has placed unprecedented demands on healthcare systems worldwide. Public hospitals have been at the forefront of the pandemic response, providing critical care for COVID-19 patients, expanding testing and vaccination programs, and managing the surge in healthcare needs. While these efforts have underscored the resilience and

adaptability of public hospitals, they have also revealed significant vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of funding and resource allocation [37]. Many public hospitals have reported severe financial strain due to increased operating costs, reduced revenue from elective procedures, and delayed government reimbursements.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of investing in public hospital infrastructure and capacity to ensure preparedness for future health emergencies. Strengthening supply chains for essential medicines and equipment, expanding intensive care unit (ICU) capacity, and improving workforce training are critical measures to enhance the resilience of public hospitals. These investments not only improve the ability of public hospitals to respond to crises but also have long-term economic benefits by reducing the economic impact of health emergencies on societies [38].

The financial and economic impacts of public hospitals are multifaceted, encompassing both the costs associated with service provision and the broader benefits of improved public health outcomes. Public hospitals play a vital role in reducing financial barriers to healthcare, protecting individuals and families from catastrophic health expenditures, and contributing to economic productivity and stability. However, the sustainability of public hospitals is threatened by rising healthcare costs, resource constraints, and funding challenges. Addressing these issues requires innovative financial strategies, such as public-private partnerships, social health insurance, and performance-based funding, as well as sustained investments in infrastructure and capacity. As healthcare systems continue to evolve, ensuring the financial sustainability of public hospitals will be essential to achieving universal health coverage and promoting equitable access to healthcare for all.

Quality of Care in Public Hospitals

Quality of care is a cornerstone of healthcare systems globally, encompassing a range of factors that ensure patients receive effective, safe, and equitable services. Public hospitals play a critical role in delivering healthcare to diverse populations, often acting as the primary providers of care in underserved and economically disadvantaged communities. The quality of care in public hospitals is a crucial determinant of health outcomes and patient satisfaction, reflecting the performance of health systems in achieving universal health coverage (UHC). However, maintaining and improving quality in these settings is a persistent challenge, influenced by resource limitations, workforce dynamics, and systemic inefficiencies.

The quality of care in public hospitals is evaluated based on various dimensions, including effectiveness, safety, patient-centeredness, timeliness, efficiency, and equity. Effectiveness, the extent to which healthcare services achieve desired health outcomes, is often hindered in public hospitals due to constraints in technology, infrastructure, and human resources [39]. Many public hospitals, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), struggle to meet clinical guidelines and standards, leading to suboptimal treatment outcomes. Addressing these issues requires investments in evidence-based practices, continuous

professional development for healthcare workers, and the integration of technology to support clinical decision-making.

Safety is another critical aspect of quality in public hospitals, encompassing measures to prevent medical errors, infections, and adverse events. Public hospitals frequently face challenges in ensuring patient safety due to overcrowding, limited staff-to-patient ratios, and insufficient infection control measures. For instance, studies have highlighted higher rates of hospital-acquired infections in public hospitals compared to their private counterparts, often attributed to resource constraints and outdated infrastructure [40]. Enhancing safety in public hospitals requires the implementation of robust infection prevention and control protocols, regular audits, and the use of technology to monitor and mitigate risks.

Patient-centeredness, which emphasizes the importance of respecting and responding to patients' preferences, needs, and values, is a vital component of quality care. Public hospitals often serve culturally and linguistically diverse populations, making it essential to tailor services to meet the unique needs of different patient groups. However, achieving patient-centered care in public hospitals is often challenging due to high patient volumes, time constraints, and limited resources for patient engagement and education [41]. Strategies to improve patient-centeredness include training healthcare providers in communication and cultural competence, incorporating patient feedback into service planning, and leveraging digital tools to enhance patient-provider interactions.

Timeliness, or the ability to provide care without unnecessary delays, is a significant quality issue in public hospitals, particularly in settings with high patient demand and limited capacity. Long waiting times for outpatient consultations, diagnostic tests, and surgical procedures are common in public hospitals, contributing to patient dissatisfaction and, in some cases, worsened health outcomes [42]. Reducing delays in public hospitals requires systemic changes, such as optimizing patient flow, increasing staffing levels, and implementing appointment scheduling systems. Additionally, the use of telemedicine and mobile health technologies can alleviate pressure on physical facilities, improving timeliness and accessibility.

Efficiency, which involves maximizing resource utilization to achieve optimal health outcomes, is a critical concern for public hospitals operating under financial constraints. Inefficient processes, such as redundant tests, prolonged hospital stays, and inadequate supply chain management, can strain limited resources and compromise the quality of care [43]. Improving efficiency in public hospitals necessitates the adoption of lean management practices, continuous quality improvement initiatives, and the use of data analytics to identify and address inefficiencies. For example, integrating electronic health records (EHRs) can streamline administrative processes, reduce duplication, and enhance care coordination.

Equity, the fair distribution of healthcare resources and services, is a defining characteristic of public hospitals, which aim to serve populations regardless of

socioeconomic status, geography, or other social determinants of health. However, disparities in the quality of care remain a significant challenge, with marginalized groups often experiencing lower-quality services due to systemic biases, language barriers, and geographic inaccessibility [44]. Addressing equity in public hospitals requires targeted interventions, such as training staff in implicit bias, expanding services in underserved areas, and ensuring the availability of interpreters and culturally appropriate care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted both the strengths and vulnerabilities of public hospitals in delivering quality care. Public hospitals were at the forefront of pandemic response efforts, providing critical care for COVID-19 patients, expanding testing and vaccination programs, and managing the surge in healthcare needs. While these efforts demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of public hospitals, they also revealed significant gaps in quality, including insufficient critical care capacity, inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE), and delays in service delivery [45]. Lessons from the pandemic underscore the importance of building resilient healthcare systems that prioritize quality across all dimensions.

One of the key strategies for improving the quality of care in public hospitals is the adoption of quality assurance and improvement programs. These programs involve systematic processes to assess and enhance the performance of healthcare services, focusing on outcomes, patient experiences, and organizational efficiency. Accreditation, a widely used quality assurance mechanism, has been shown to improve clinical outcomes, patient safety, and staff satisfaction in public hospitals [46]. However, achieving and maintaining accreditation requires substantial investments in infrastructure, training, and continuous monitoring, which may be challenging for resource-constrained settings.

Another promising approach is the integration of digital health technologies to support quality improvement efforts. Telemedicine, for example, has been instrumental in extending the reach of public hospitals to remote and underserved populations, reducing disparities in access and improving patient satisfaction [47]. Similarly, EHRs and health information systems enable better documentation, data analysis, and care coordination, contributing to improved clinical outcomes and efficiency. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) in diagnostics, treatment planning, and resource allocation also holds significant potential for enhancing quality in public hospitals.

Human resources are a critical determinant of quality in public hospitals, with the competence, motivation, and well-being of healthcare workers directly influencing patient outcomes. Workforce shortages, high turnover rates, and burnout are common challenges in public hospitals, exacerbated by heavy workloads and limited support systems [48]. Addressing these issues requires investments in recruitment, training, and retention strategies, as well as measures to improve working conditions and promote staff well-being. For instance, providing opportunities for professional development, implementing supportive supervision, and fostering a culture of teamwork can enhance staff morale and performance.

Patient engagement and empowerment are also essential components of quality care in public hospitals. Empowering patients to participate in their care decisions, understand their health conditions, and navigate the healthcare system can improve adherence to treatment plans, reduce complications, and enhance overall satisfaction. Public hospitals can foster patient engagement by providing clear and accessible health information, involving patients in care planning, and establishing feedback mechanisms to address concerns and improve services [49]. The quality of care in public hospitals is a multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive and systemic approach. Ensuring effectiveness, safety, patient-centeredness, timeliness, efficiency, and equity in public hospitals is essential for achieving UHC and improving population health outcomes. While public hospitals face significant challenges in maintaining quality, particularly in resource-constrained settings, innovations in technology, quality assurance programs, and workforce development offer promising solutions. Strengthening the quality of care in public hospitals not only enhances patient experiences and outcomes but also contributes to the broader goals of health equity and social justice.

Patient Experiences and Satisfaction

Fundamental markers of the caliber and efficacy of healthcare systems are patient experiences and satisfaction. These ideas, which are strongly related to treatment compliance, health outcomes, and the general standing of healthcare facilities, capture patients' feelings, expectations, and impressions of their care. In order to guarantee pleasant patient experiences and high levels of satisfaction, public hospitals—which cater to a variety of sometimes underserved populations—face particular opportunities and problems. Achieving universal health coverage (UHC) and promoting fair healthcare systems depend on comprehending and enhancing these aspects.

The quality of human contacts, the physical setting of care, the effectiveness of services, and the perceived efficacy of treatments are some of the aspects that influence patient experiences at public hospitals. Patient satisfaction is largely determined by interpersonal interactions, especially with healthcare practitioners. Positive patient experiences are consistently associated with healthcare professionals' respect, empathy, and clear communication. However, it might be difficult to establish high-quality provider-patient relationships in public hospitals, where patient volumes are large and staff shortages are widespread. Overworked employees frequently don't have enough time to interact with patients, which can cause discontent and a sense of abandonment [50].

Another important factor influencing patient experiences in public hospitals is the physical setting of care. Patients' opinions of the quality of care are greatly influenced by elements like comfort, seclusion, and cleanliness. Unfortunately, overcrowding and poor infrastructure are common problems in public hospitals, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In addition to endangering patient comfort, these situations also raise concerns about safety and infection control, which lowers satisfaction levels even more. In order to create environments that support pleasant patient experiences, infrastructure investments, including expansions and renovations, are crucial [51].

Patient satisfaction is also significantly impacted by the effectiveness of service delivery, which includes elements like waiting times, appointment scheduling, and the accessibility of diagnostic and therapeutic services. Patients frequently complain about lengthy wait times at public hospitals, which are frequently caused by a lack of resources, ineffective administrative practices, and excessive patient demand. Frustration and a decline in faith in the healthcare system may result from these delays. Waiting times can be decreased and the overall patient experience improved by putting process enhancements like electronic health records, triage procedures, and simplified patient flow systems into place [52].

Since people assess their care based on results and the resolution of their health conditions, perceived treatment effectiveness is a crucial factor in patient satisfaction. Public hospitals must make sure that their services adhere to strict clinical standards because they frequently treat complicated situations and underprivileged populations. Effective care delivery, however, may be hampered by resource constraints, such as a lack of drugs, supplies, and qualified staff. Improving patient outcomes and satisfaction requires addressing these gaps through investments in supply chains, training, and technological advancements [53].

In public hospitals, cultural and socioeconomic issues also affect patient happiness and experiences. Patients' impressions of care may be impacted by the expectations, values, and beliefs they bring to the healthcare interaction. For example, miscommunications and discontent may result from cultural differences and linguistic hurdles between patients and physicians. Public hospitals must embrace culturally sensitive care practices, such as hiring staff from a variety of backgrounds, offering interpretation services, and integrating cultural competence training into professional development programs, because they serve a varied community. In addition to enhancing communication, these actions help patients and clinicians develop mutual respect and trust [54].

Public hospital patient satisfaction and experiences have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in demand frequently put a strain on public hospitals' ability to provide high-quality care, even though they were crucial in the pandemic response by offering testing, vaccinations, and critical care. Longer wait times, less access to non-COVID-19 services, and increased concerns about infection and safety were all experienced by many patients. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the pandemic also demonstrated the public hospitals' adaptability and resilience as they quickly expanded their offerings and put creative measures into place to keep patients receiving care [55]. The pandemic's lessons highlight the value of readiness and fortitude in guaranteeing satisfying patient experiences in times of emergency.

In public hospitals, technology has become a useful tool for improving patient satisfaction and experiences. For instance, telemedicine has made it possible for patients to receive care from a distance, eliminating the need for travel and limiting their exposure to congested facilities. By giving people access to medical records, appointment scheduling, and educational materials, digital solutions like patient portals and mobile health applications have enabled patients to better manage their health. These developments increase patient happiness and

engagement in addition to convenience [56]. However, issues including digital literacy, infrastructure deficiencies, and data security concerns must be addressed for technology to be successfully integrated into public hospitals.

Surveys of patient satisfaction and feedback are crucial instruments for evaluating and enhancing patient experiences in public hospitals. Hospital management can pinpoint areas for improvement, track advancement, and carry out focused treatments by methodically gathering and evaluating patient feedback. Addressing patient concerns and involving them in decision-making procedures in a transparent manner promotes accountability and confidence, which raises satisfaction levels even more. For instance, creating patient advisory groups can give patients a forum to express their opinions and help shape hospital procedures and policies [57].

Another important element affecting patient experiences and satisfaction is workforce involvement. Healthcare professionals are at the forefront of patient care, and the way they engage with patients is directly impacted by their attitudes, behaviors, and general well-being. The capacity of healthcare professionals in public hospitals to provide patient-centered, compassionate care may be jeopardized by high levels of stress and burnout. Fostering great patient experiences requires addressing workforce concerns with strategies like professional development opportunities, supportive workplace cultures, and enough staffing [58].

When assessing patient happiness and experiences at public hospitals, equity is a key factor. A key tenet of public healthcare systems is guaranteeing that all patients, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or geographic location, have access to high-quality care. Disparities in patient experiences do, however, still exist, with marginalized groups frequently reporting poorer levels of satisfaction as a result of institutional biases and impediments. Reducing access gaps, enhancing cultural competency, and guaranteeing that high-quality care is provided fairly to all patient populations are all necessary to address these imbalances [59].

Health outcomes, system effectiveness, and public trust are all impacted by patient experiences and satisfaction, which are important aspects of care quality at public hospitals. Public hospitals offer a lot of opportunity to improve care delivery through worker participation, technological advancements, and patient-centered practices, but they also face particular hurdles in achieving patient expectations. To guarantee that every patient has a favorable healthcare experience, structural problems like resource constraints, cultural obstacles, and inequities in care must be addressed. Public hospitals may enhance their position as fair and efficient healthcare providers in the fight for universal health coverage by placing a high priority on patient participation and satisfaction.

Conclusion

In order to reduce health disparities, achieve universal health coverage, and advance community well-being, public hospitals play a critical role in providing free healthcare services. Public hospitals, which are essential components of

healthcare systems, fill important gaps in care quality, affordability, and accessibility, particularly for disadvantaged and underprivileged groups. However, a lack of funding, a lack of staff, inadequate infrastructure, and growing healthcare demands frequently threaten the viability and efficacy of public hospitals. These difficulties highlight the significance of systemic changes, creative fixes, and strategic investments in enhancing the capability and resilience of public hospitals.

Public hospitals support larger societal objectives like poverty reduction, health equity, and economic productivity in addition to lowering financial barriers to care. They contribute significantly to bettering population health outcomes with their all-inclusive services, which include prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation. Furthermore, their crucial role in ensuring global health security is highlighted by their capacity to adjust during public health emergencies, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public hospitals must use technological innovations like electronic health records and telemedicine to increase their effectiveness and service delivery. It is equally important to ensure equitable resource allocation, promote worker well-being, and strengthen patient-centered practices. Long-term investments in public hospital capacity and infrastructure, backed by creative finance approaches, should be given top priority in policy frameworks and governance procedures.

To sum up, public hospitals serve as more than just medical facilities; they form the foundation of resilience and justice in healthcare systems. In order to achieve sustainable, inclusive development and advance health as a human right, these institutions must be strengthened.

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الدور المحوري للمستشفيات العامة في تقديم الخدمات الصحية المجانية: تعزيز الوصول وتحقيق نتائج صحية إيجابية للمجتمعات الملخص:

الخلفية: تلعب المستشفيات العامة دورًا أساسيًا في تحقيق تغطية صحية شاملة من خلال تقديم خدمات صحية مجانية للسكان، خاصة في المجتمعات المهمشة. تسهم هذه المستشفيات في تحسين الوصول إلى الرعاية الصحية وتقليل التفاوتات الصحية، مما يؤدي إلى تحسين النتائج الصحية العامة. ومع ذلك، تواجه المستشفيات العامة تحديات مستمرة تشمل محدودية الموارد وزيادة الطلب على الخدمات، مما يؤثر على قدرتها على تقديم رعاية عالية الجودة.

الهدف: يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف الدور المحوري للمستشفيات العامة في تقديم الرعاية الصحية المجانية، وتقييم تأثيرها على تحسين الوصول للخدمات الصحية وتعزيز الإنصاف الصحي، وتحديد الاستراتيجيات اللازمة لمواجهة التحديات التي تواجهها.

الطرق: اعتمد البحث على مراجعة منهجية للأدبيات والدراسات السابقة، مع تحليل البيانات المتعلقة بفعالية المستشفيات العامة في تقديم الخدمات وتأثيرها على النتائج الصحية.

النتائج: كشفت النتائج أن المستشفيات العامة تسهم بشكل كبير في تقليل العوائق المالية أمام الرعاية الصحية، وتقديم خدمات صحية شاملة للمرضى، بما في ذلك الفئات الأقل حظًا. كما أظهرت النتائج تأثيرًا إيجابيًا على تحسين المؤشرات الصحية، مثل معدلات الوفيات والأمراض المزمنة. ومع ذلك، يظل نقص التمويل والموارد من أبرز العقبات.

الخلاصة: تمثل المستشفيات العامة عنصرًا حيويًا لتحقيق العدالة الصحية وتعزيز النتائج الصحية الإيجابية. ويعد الاستثمار المستدام والابتكار في الإدارة الصحية ضروريًا لتحسين جودة الخدمات وضمان استدامتها على المدى الطويل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المستشفيات العامة، الرعاية الصحية المجانية، الإنصاف الصحي، تحسين الوصول، النتائج الصحية.