EURASIAN EXPERIMENT JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH (EEJPH)

ISSN: 2992-4081 ©EEJPH Publications

Volume 6 Issue 2 2024

Health Disparities: Addressing Racial and Ethnic Inequities in Care

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ABSTRACT

Health disparities based on race and ethnicity are a pervasive challenge in healthcare systems globally. These disparities manifest in unequal access to quality care, poorer health outcomes, and higher disease burdens among minority populations. Rooted in historical and systemic inequities, these disparities are further exacerbated by social determinants of health, including socioeconomic status, education, and environmental factors. This paper examines the contributing factors to racial and ethnic health disparities, including systemic biases, cultural barriers, and institutional racism. It discusses effective strategies for mitigation, including community-based programs, policy reforms, and education to foster cultural competence and advocacy. Case studies highlight successful interventions addressing minority health inequities, offering replicable models for broader implementation. By promoting integrated, systemic approaches and fostering partnerships between communities, policymakers, and healthcare providers, this paper advocates for sustainable solutions to achieve health equity and improve health outcomes for all.

Keywords: Health disparities, Racial and ethnic inequities, Social determinants of health, Health equity, Systemic racism.

INTRODUCTION

Health disparities, or inequities in the access to or quality of health care and health outcomes based on race, ethnicity, or any other characteristic, are profound across populations. The processes and outcomes of chronic and acute health-related issues are heavily influenced by social and economic conditions and are often shaped by policies and institutional practices. Identifying and recognizing the influence of race and ethnicity on health outcomes is crucial for addressing these issues. It is also important to understand various degrees of health and the influences of social determinants of health on quality of life, all of which are influenced by race, ethnicity, and other characteristics. Health disparities have unfortunately been a part of the human experience since the dawn of societal organization and have persisted not only in the United States but universally, historically, and in contemporary times. Though enormous strides have been made in addressing disparities, work still needs to be done to truly achieve health equity, eliminating disparities nationwide and within states, and improving the health of all Americans. Many of the factors that drive racial and ethnic health disparities are decades or centuries old, although current conditions usually exacerbate them. It is important to raise awareness of these issues because so many of them have historical roots. This will aid in the development of community partnerships, programs, and policies that are most effective at mitigating and eradicating these issues. The chapters are geared to focus on historical, present, and prospective discussions regarding health disparities and identify the factors that create these disparities and the actions that can be taken to address, negate, and eliminate such disparities and problems [1, 2].

Factors Contributing to Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities

The existence of health disparities across racial and ethnic populations is well documented. Disparities in diseases, disabilities, and other health outcomes, as well as barriers to care across different populations,

have been identified. Seemingly, advances in medical technology and the availability of the best healthcare in the world have not eliminated health disparities across a variety of diseases. Despite significant evidence documenting such differences, disagreement persists regarding the factors contributing to such disparities [3, 4]. The explanation for health disparities is complex and related to the interaction of social determinants and systemic features of healthcare. Social determinants that affect the ability to obtain healthcare and to manage disease according to evidence-based recommendations involve the environmental surroundings in which an individual or group lives and are likely to relate to one's race and/or ethnicity. Personal behavior toward health is affected by values, attitudes, family practices, and resources that are similar within cultural groups. Much of an individual's beliefs, understanding of, and behavior toward health are formulated through cultural mechanisms. Systemic features of a healthcare organization, such as provider bias, discrimination, as well as a lack of cultural confidence, are internal forces that can contribute to healthcare disparities. Minority populations generally have lower socioeconomic status, are less educated, have lower incomes, and reside in environmentally hazardous conditions. The Hispanic population has the lowest proportion of high school graduates; almost 40% of Hispanic children live in poverty; and Hispanics have among the highest rates of substandard housing and environmental pollution. Similar situations prevail for African Americans. The difficulties in obtaining employment and housing for injured workers result in being forced to live in housing and communities with above-average risk factors that have ill effects on health status. Institutional biases and discrimination are ever present in society and can affect people's access to care and services. Studies have demonstrated that African Americans and Hispanics receive fewer diagnostic tests and treatment procedure rates regardless of insurance status or income. Such results suggest that the quality of care provided was due to more systemic and individual shortcomings than the group of physicians provided. And if a treatment is provided, cost and type of insurance can also be a factor. The quality of medical care has also been shown to vary based on the patient's race. In a survey of medical records, 85% of either Hispanic or African American patients received the right level of care compared to 90% of white patients, even when the issues are controlled for income and insurance status. Patient-provider communication can be another site of cultural conflict; different dialects and values may inhibit patients from openly discussing their health needs and deter them from demanding the attention they require. Although for various age groups, levels of education, and language, some studies suggest that this is not valid, many other studies, particularly those with elderly people with low levels of learning, and those who do not speak English, demonstrate an increased incidence of communication obstacles [5, 6].

Strategies For Addressing Health Disparities

Strategies for Addressing Health Disparities The need for integrated programming to reduce health disparities is signaled by research. Addressing the health concerns of racially and ethnically diverse groups requires an understanding and respect for each population. Community-based programs are grounded in the philosophy of inclusivity and use individual and community strengths to develop strategies that target the specific needs of a particular population. Policy changes may be required to reduce the inequalities in access to health care and the quality of care received. Education helps individuals examine their beliefs and attitudes about themselves and others, which prepares them for continued action. Advocacy helps people learn to speak up for themselves and take action to change policies, programs, and services with support from allies. A multi-faceted approach is needed to reduce health disparities and achieve equity in health care. Some of the strategies to address health disparities are changes in community infrastructure and community-wide policies, such as nutrition and physical activity programs and redevelopment projects. Individuals may suffer as a result of a legacy of social and economic systems structured in ways that may limit access to socioeconomic and political power. An integrated systems approach to understanding the factors that affect health helps to take into consideration the relationships between individual-level, community-level, and policy-related factors that affect health. The ultimate goal is a systematic approach to achieving health equity by reducing institutional racism. Partnership among health care providers, community groups, and policymakers is critical. Careful evaluation of successful interventions to help decrease health disparities and achieve health equity is necessary [7, 8].

Case Studies and Best Practices

This section presents case studies and best practices for addressing health disparities. By showcasing specific programs established to address the unique needs of various racial and ethnic minority groups, the case studies provide illustrative examples of programs that are working to reduce minority health

disparities. While it is not the intention of these summaries to provide an exhaustive inventory of programs or organizations, it is anticipated that they may lend insight to other practitioners interested in starting initiatives of their own. In particular, the case studies focus on established programs with enough data or evaluation results to demonstrate that they are yielding an impact. Of the case studies we have selected to showcase here, it appears that these programs are effective as well. In all cases, race was the primary condition that the program was designed to address. (Or, more accurately, the focus was on issues and illnesses of general concern but disproportionately represented by these particular populations.) Many of the programs target the "minority of minorities." This means that efforts are placed not only on serving minorities in general but also on subpopulations that are clustered in a particular geographic location, such as African immigrants in the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. The case studies are drawn from various parts of the country: rural and urban areas, as well as from health departments serving states in the West, Midwest, Northeast, South, and Southwest. In addition, individuals interviewed have at least two years of experience with the program. Interviews were conducted in person, via email, or by telephone, with any resulting information deemed credible based on the source [9, 10].

Future Directions

Our paper has focused on providing an overview of the face of health disparities in America today. Despite some of the challenges we face in addressing those disparities, it is critical that the medical, public health and policymaking communities persist in the fight for health equity. Today's disparities reflected in our discussion have persisted for too long. As communities and providers address the transcription of our increased awareness of racial and ethnic disparities in health status into concrete changes in the quality of health care and trust between systems, few concrete measures of success emerge. We encourage future research in these areas and believe that, as we develop innovative solutions, among the first to be interrogated will be those that demonstrate complex interrelationships among key players across the spectrum of interest [11, 12, 13]. One of the challenges in the development of an evidence base for health disparities research and practice has been the lack of longitudinal data and studies that track changes in policy, population composition, and social and contextual determinants, to help us understand the impact of key indicators on such outcomes as access, adequacy, and quality. We now need to add the elimination of disparities as a component of the nation's, our states', and our communities' health policy agenda. Nothing happens until the political will has been created. Even today, we must continue to educate healthcare providers, point-of-service personnel, and the public about the scope and urgency to address the problem of health disparities if we are to begin to make a difference for future generations. Public health must be ever vigilant and intensely focused to ameliorate the disparities in care. Once again, let us begin anew to make history [14, 15, 16].

CONCLUSION

The persistence of racial and ethnic health disparities underscores the urgency of addressing systemic inequities within healthcare. Historical and structural factors, coupled with the influence of social determinants, demand comprehensive solutions. Effective strategies must integrate community engagement, policy changes, education, and advocacy to combat disparities and promote equity. Case studies demonstrate the success of targeted interventions, offering scalable insights for nationwide application. Achieving health equity requires a sustained commitment from healthcare providers, policymakers, and communities. By fostering partnerships and leveraging data-driven approaches, we can build a healthcare system that ensures equal opportunities for health and well-being, transcending racial and ethnic divides. This collective effort is crucial for shaping a future where health disparities are no longer a societal norm but a resolved challenge.

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CITE AS: Kamanzi Ntakirutimana G. (2024). Health Disparities: Addressing Racial and Ethnic Inequities in Care. EURASIAN EXPERIMENT JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, 6(2):53-56.