

# Promoting Access and Equity in Healthcare: Issues, Challenges and Way Forward in Pakistan

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Health care access to all in a given community is becoming a growing challenge for healthcare providers. Even a much greater challenge is provision of health care services with equity and fairness.<sup>1</sup> Recent demographic changes in population with movement of people from rural to urban areas<sup>2</sup>, coupled with growing elderly population and their increased health care needs<sup>3</sup>, are burdening health care services on one end and technological advances offering expensive remedies for complex medical problems is making health care expensive in background of limited available resources.<sup>4</sup>

This situation is creating issues of access to healthcare in developing countries like Pakistan that have limited resources. Equity in healthcare requires provision of healthcare to all sections regardless of their ability to pay. Access and equity in delivery of healthcare services are issues and challenges facing countries like Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

For Pakistan health related indicators are lagging far behind in comparison to other developing countries in the region;<sup>5</sup> reasons being dysfunctional health care delivery system with lack of infrastructure, human and material resources. Most important is the lack of coordination between primary, secondary and tertiary level of healthcare leading to access and equity issue with poor health related outcome.

Making healthcare delivery system more functional would require experienced primary care physician so that 90% of healthcare related problems can be identified and addressed outside hospital at primary care level. Left over 10% of patients making their way to the hospitals are of complicated enough nature to be dealt with effectively by secondary and tertiary level physicians. It will prevent primary care level issues going to secondary and tertiary level physicians. This strategy will lead to huge cost saving that will provide funds to promote access and equity to healthcare in the country by strengthening primary care services.<sup>6,7</sup>

Health care services access and equity are larger issues for those countries with limited resources like Pakistan, since most of the health care delivery takes place in the private sector with patients paying out of pocket for health care services. It is through making health care delivery system more functional that

access and equity in healthcare can be promoted in the country. Access to health care services in Pakistan should ensure access to cost effective and high quality healthcare services for all, a measure that will also promote equity in health care services delivery.<sup>4</sup>

Access to healthcare can be difficult in regions that lack proper communication and transport services. Remote regions of Pakistan not only lack essential health care access, a much greater challenge is to transport patients with urgent need of medical attention to healthcare facilities available in more developed parts of the country. Ensuring access to health care to such remote areas with equity and fairness is a challenge that can only be achieved through improvement in facilities available in these areas of the country.<sup>8</sup>

A heavy focus on disease prevention can reduce incidence and prevalence of diseases, with resultant reduced burden on health care services; spared resources than can be utilize to promote access to healthcare services and with equity.

Early disease detection through evidence based effective screening programs can ensure early detection of health problems that can be dealt with more effectively and with less costs and better healthcare related outcomes. Late detection of diseases causes cost of treating advance diseases to go up and treatment outcomes are less than optimal with complications that require addition rehabilitation costs. Saving to health care delivery system through such an approach can again be used to promote access and equity to health care by strengthening health care system.<sup>9</sup>

Today we stand at crossroads, making it mandatory for us to use limited available healthcare related resources with efficiency and in a cost effective manner. This will ensure that our people have access to necessary healthcare with equity and justice. We can no longer continue to invest in more costly healthcare services that will benefit a few and with less than optimum outcomes, at the expense of not investing in low cost interventions that will have a higher healthcare related outcome by impacting on larger population of the country.

It is time to revamp health care delivery system in the

country to ensure access to healthcare to larger sections of our population and with equity and fairness.

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