

What is “Access to Care” in a Patient-Centric Care Model?

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Abstract

This study investigates the concept of "access to care" within a patient-centric care model, which prioritizes individualized, holistic, and collaborative healthcare. It explores how access involves the availability, affordability, and quality of healthcare services and how these dimensions align with patient-centered principles such as personalized care and shared decision-making. By providing blue ocean strategies to enhance access within this framework, the research highlights the importance of integrating patient needs and preferences into healthcare delivery to improve overall outcomes and satisfaction.

Keywords: Patient-centric care; access to care; affordability; quality; availability.

Introduction

Access to care is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the ability of individuals to obtain necessary healthcare services. It is crucial for ensuring physical, social, and mental health and involves several key dimensions: availability, affordability, and quality of healthcare services. Availability refers to the presence of healthcare services and resources within a community. This includes the number of

healthcare facilities, such as hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies, as well as the availability of healthcare professionals, such as doctors, nurses, and specialists. Adequate availability ensures that individuals can find and reach healthcare services locally and on time [1,2]. However, many regions face shortages of healthcare providers, which can limit access to necessary care [3,4]. Affordability addresses the economic barriers to accessing healthcare services. It considers the cost of healthcare, including consultations, treatments, medications, and medical procedures. Even individuals with health insurance can face financial barriers due to high out-of-pocket costs [5,6]. Affordable healthcare means that individuals can access necessary services without experiencing financial hardship, essential for preventing delays or avoidance of care [7,8]. Quality of care refers to the standard of healthcare services provided. It includes the competence and expertise of healthcare professionals, the safety and effectiveness of treatments, the availability of modern medical technologies, and the overall patient experience. Access to quality care ensures that individuals receive appropriate and effective healthcare services that meet their needs (Clay et al., 2021) [9]. Quality care is also culturally competent and acceptable to patients, which can influence

their willingness to seek and continue care [10,11]. Also, Access to care is further influenced by several other dimensions: the ability to receive care promptly when a health need is recognized (timeliness); health insurance facilitates entry into the healthcare system, but it does not guarantee access on its own (coverage); cultural and social factors that affect an individual's ability to accept or seek healthcare services (acceptability); the net clinical benefit to the patient, ensuring that the expected health benefits exceed any potential negative consequences (appropriateness) [9].

The patient-centric care model is a healthcare approach that prioritizes the individual needs, values, and goals of patients, actively involving them in their own healthcare decisions. This model emphasizes personalized care, shared decision-making, and a holistic approach to patient well-being. Unlike traditional models that often focus on treating specific health issues in isolation, patient-centric care considers the whole person, including their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being (Edgman-Levitan & Schoenbaum, 2021). One of the core principles of this model is respect for patient autonomy, ensuring that patients' preferences and values guide all clinical decisions [12]. Effective communication is also vital, as it ensures that patients fully understand their treatment options, prognosis, and potential side effects, thereby fostering a collaborative relationship between patients and healthcare providers [13-15].

Shared decision-making is another cornerstone of the patient-centric care model, where healthcare providers and patients work together to make informed decisions about treatment plans [12,13]. This collaborative approach is supported by the integration of technology, which enhances patient engagement and empowerment by providing access to health information and facilitating continuous care [16,17]. The model also emphasizes care coordination and continuity, ensuring that patients receive consistent and comprehensive care over time. By focusing on these principles, the patient-centric care model not only improves healthcare outcomes and patient satisfaction but also reduces healthcare costs and staff burnout [14]. This approach aligns with value-based care initiatives, which prioritize high

quality, coordinated care over the traditional fee-for-service model that often leads to fragmented and siloed care [18].

Access to care within a Patient-centric care Model of care is a crucial aspect that requires in-depth exploration to understand how healthcare delivery can be optimized to prioritize patient needs and preferences. This research essay aims to investigate the concept of access to care within the framework of patient-centric care, emphasizing the significance of aligning access to care with the core principles of patient-centeredness, such as personalized care, shared decision-making and holistic approaches to patient well-being. By examining how access to care can be enhanced and tailored to meet individual patient needs within a patient-centric care model, this study seeks to underscore the importance of ensuring that healthcare services are not only available and affordable but also of high quality and delivered in a manner that respects patient autonomy and fosters collaborative relationships between patients and healthcare providers.

Literature Review

Access to care has undergone significant evolution over the past century, reflecting broader changes in healthcare systems and societal expectations. In the early 20th century, access was primarily defined by the availability of medical services, often concentrated in urban areas, which left rural populations underserved [19]. The post World War II era saw the development of more structured healthcare systems, with access increasingly framed around the affordability of care, driven by the introduction of Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s [20]. Traditional models of access were predominantly provider-centered, focusing on the capacity of healthcare systems to deliver services and manage patient flow. This approach often overlooked individual patient needs and preferences, leading to disparities in care quality and outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups [21].

In contrast, modern patient-centric care models represent a paradigm shift toward recognizing and integrating patient preferences, values, and needs into the care process [22]. The patient-centric approach emphasizes a holistic view of access, encompassing not only the availability and

affordability of services but also the quality of interactions between patients and healthcare providers. This model advocates for shared decision-making, personalized care plans, and improved coordination across care settings [23]. Advances in technology, such as telemedicine and electronic health records, further support this model by enhancing access and engagement, particularly for those in underserved or remote areas [24]. Thus, while traditional models focus on systemic delivery mechanisms, contemporary approaches highlight the importance of aligning healthcare delivery with individual patient experiences and preferences.

The patient-centric care model prioritizes several key elements to enhance access to care, fundamentally shifting from a provider-centered to a patient-centered approach. Care coordination is central, involving seamless integration of services across various providers and settings to ensure that patients receive comprehensive and continuous care [15]. This integration helps to address gaps in care and reduces redundancies, making healthcare more accessible and efficient. Patient engagement emphasizes the active involvement of patients in their care, including decision-making and self-management, which fosters greater satisfaction and adherence to treatment plans [12,14] (Edgman & Schoenbaum). Personalized treatment plans are tailored to individual patient needs and preferences, enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of care [23]. By addressing specific health goals and circumstances, these personalized approaches make care more accessible and acceptable to patients, thereby improving overall health outcomes and reducing barriers to accessing care. Together, these elements work to make healthcare more responsive and attuned to the needs of individuals, directly impacting access and quality of care [22].

Achieving access to care within the patient-centric model faces several notable challenges. Socioeconomic barriers remain a significant obstacle, as individuals with lower incomes or a lack of insurance often experience difficulties accessing quality care. These barriers include the high cost of services, out-of-pocket expenses, and limited availability of affordable healthcare options [25]. Geographic disparities

further exacerbate these issues, with rural and underserved urban areas often lacking adequate healthcare facilities and providers, which limit access to essential services [26]. Additionally, systemic inefficiencies, such as fragmented care and inadequate care coordination, hinder the ability of patient-centric models to deliver seamless and integrated care [27]. These systemic issues can lead to delays in care, duplications of services, and overall reduced quality of care, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations.

Despite these challenges, the patient-centric approach offers several opportunities to enhance access to care. Technology innovations, such as telemedicine and electronic health records, can bridge geographic gaps by providing remote access to healthcare services and improving care coordination [28]. Patient engagement and empowerment initiatives enable individuals to actively participate in their care decisions, leading to better adherence and improved health outcomes [29]. Furthermore, integrated care models that focus on coordination and personalized care can address systemic inefficiencies by creating more streamlined and efficient pathways for managing chronic conditions and complex health needs [23]. By leveraging these opportunities, patient-centric models can overcome some barriers to access and improve overall healthcare delivery. But not without understanding the “access to care” component of the patient-centric approach.

“Access to Care” in a Patient-Centric Model

The patient-centric care model represents a significant shift from traditional healthcare paradigms by emphasizing personalized, holistic, and collaborative care. It respects patient autonomy, fosters effective communication, and involves patients in decision-making processes, ultimately aiming to improve overall health outcomes and patient satisfaction.

Availability of healthcare services:

Access to care within a patient-centric model transcends the mere availability of healthcare services, intertwining with the principles of patient-centeredness to ensure that healthcare delivery is not only reachable but also tailored to

individual needs, preferences, and values. This integration is crucial for achieving optimal health outcomes, as it aligns healthcare services with the holistic, personalized, and participatory tenets of patient-centric care, thereby fostering a healthcare environment where access is defined not just by the presence of services but by the quality of the patient-provider relationship, the continuity of care, and the active engagement of patients in their health management.

Availability of Services is a key component of access to care. A patient-centric model has the potential to improve and impact the availability of healthcare services by incorporating various strategies such as extended hours, telehealth options, and integration of services. Extended hours of operation in healthcare settings can enhance access to care by accommodating patients' busy schedules and reducing barriers related to time constraints. Research has shown that extended hours, including evening and weekend appointments, can improve access to primary care services and reduce emergency department visits for non-emergency conditions [30]. By offering flexible hours, healthcare providers can ensure that individuals have greater opportunities to seek care when needed, enhancing the availability of services.

Telehealth options, which involve the use of technology to provide remote healthcare services, can significantly improve the availability of care, particularly for individuals in remote or underserved areas. Telehealth allows patients to access healthcare services virtually and receive medical advice, consultations, and even monitoring from a distance. This approach has been particularly beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it enables individuals to receive care while minimizing the risk of exposure to the virus. Studies have highlighted the positive impact of telehealth on improving access to care, reducing travel time and costs, and enhancing patient satisfaction [31]. By integrating telehealth options into a patient-centric model, healthcare providers can expand the availability of services beyond traditional in-person visits.

Integration of services within a patient-centric model can also enhance the availability of care by streamlining healthcare delivery and ensuring comprehensive and

coordinated services. When healthcare providers and organizations work together to integrate various aspects of care, such as primary care, specialty care, and behavioral health services, patients can seamlessly access a continuum of care. Integrated care models have shown promise in improving access to care, reducing fragmentation, and enhancing health outcomes [32]. By breaking down silos between different healthcare providers and disciplines, integration promotes collaboration and ensures that patients receive the right care at the right time, ultimately enhancing the availability and accessibility of services.

Affordability:

Patient-centric care models place a strong emphasis on addressing issues of cost and affordability to improve access to care. One approach is the implementation of sliding scale fees, which adjust the cost of care based on a patient's income level. This allows individuals with lower incomes to receive necessary healthcare services at a reduced cost, ensuring that financial barriers do not hinder their access to care. Sliding scale fees have been successfully implemented in various healthcare settings, including community health centers and safety-net hospitals, to improve affordability and increase access to care for underserved populations [33]. By tailoring costs to patients' financial situations, patient-centric care models help ensure that individuals can access healthcare services without experiencing financial hardship. Value-based care is another key component of patient-centric models that addresses affordability. This approach shifts the focus from a fee-for-service model to one that emphasizes the value and outcomes of healthcare services. By incentivizing high-quality care and better health outcomes, value-based care models aim to reduce unnecessary healthcare costs while improving patient outcomes. This model encourages healthcare providers to focus on preventive care, chronic disease management, and care coordination, which can ultimately lead to cost savings and improved affordability [34]. By aligning financial incentives with patient outcomes, value-based care models can help control costs and make healthcare services more affordable and accessible.

Insurance coverage options play a significant role in ensuring affordability within patient-centric care models. These models advocate for comprehensive insurance coverage, including coverage for preventive services, medications, and necessary treatments. Expanding insurance coverage through initiatives such as Medicaid expansion or the implementation of universal healthcare systems can help reduce financial barriers and ensure that individuals have access to affordable healthcare services. Additionally, patient-centric care models emphasize the importance of transparent and easy-to-understand insurance plans that provide coverage for a wide range of services. This approach helps individuals make informed decisions about their healthcare and access the services they need without facing significant financial burdens [35].

Quality of care:

Of course, ensuring quality of care is a key constituent of access to care in patient-centric care. A patient-centric approach has a significant impact on the quality of care received by individuals. By placing the patient at the center of care delivery, patient-centric models prioritize personalized and holistic care, leading to improved patient outcomes. Research has shown that patient-centric care models are associated with better health outcomes, such as reduced hospital readmissions, improved medication adherence, and enhanced self-management of chronic conditions [36,37]. This approach recognizes that patients' unique needs, preferences, and values play a crucial role in shaping their healthcare journey, and tailors care accordingly. By involving patients in shared decision-making and considering their perspectives, patient-centric care models promote better treatment adherence and patient engagement, which can lead to improved health outcomes.

Patient satisfaction rates are also positively impacted by patient-centric care models. These models prioritize effective communication, respect for patient autonomy, and involvement of patients in decision-making processes, which contribute to higher patient satisfaction rates. Studies have shown that patient-centric care is associated with increased patient satisfaction and improved patient

experiences, including higher levels of trust, improved communication with healthcare providers, and increased perceived quality of care [14,36,37]. By focusing on patient-centeredness, healthcare providers can create a supportive and collaborative environment that meets the emotional and informational needs of patients, resulting in higher levels of satisfaction and overall positive healthcare experiences.

Patient feedback plays a crucial role in shaping care delivery within patient-centric models. By actively seeking and incorporating patient feedback, healthcare organizations can identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments to enhance the quality of care. Patient feedback can provide insights into the patient's experience, uncover gaps in care delivery, and drive quality improvement initiatives. Engaging patients in the co-design of care and valuing their perspectives establish a continuous feedback loop that promotes ongoing learning and improvement within the healthcare system [15]. Patient feedback can help identify areas where care may not align with patient preferences or may fall short in meeting patient needs, ultimately leading to adjustments and improvements in care delivery.

Patient engagement and empowerment:

In a patient-centric approach, patients are actively engaged in decision-making processes and encouraged to take an active role in their healthcare. This involvement fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, enabling individuals to make informed decisions regarding their care. Research has shown that patient engagement in decision-making leads to higher treatment adherence, improved patient outcomes, and increased satisfaction with care [38]. By involving patients in decision-making, a patient-centric model ensures that care aligns with individual preferences and values, ultimately enhancing access to care that is tailored to the specific needs and goals of patients.

Furthermore, patient-centric models promote patient self-management, empowering individuals to take control of their health and well-being. This empowerment is facilitated by providing patients with the necessary tools, resources, and education to actively participate in their care. By

fostering patient self-management, a patient-centric model encourages individuals to engage in healthy behaviors, adhere to treatment plans, and effectively manage chronic conditions. Studies have shown that patient self-management interventions, such as education programs, goal setting, and support from healthcare providers, can lead to improved health outcomes, reduced healthcare utilization, and increased patient satisfaction [10,15]. By prioritizing patient engagement and empowerment, a patient-centric model enhances individuals' ability to access and manage their care effectively.

Care Coordination:

Care coordination plays a crucial role in enhancing access to care by ensuring the seamless integration of services across different providers and care settings. By coordinating care, healthcare providers can effectively address the complex needs of patients, especially those with multiple chronic conditions or complex healthcare requirements. Care coordination involves the collaboration and communication between various healthcare professionals, including primary care physicians, specialists, nurses, and other allied health professionals, to ensure the continuity and comprehensiveness of care. Research has shown that effective care coordination is associated with improved access to care, reduced healthcare costs, and enhanced patient outcomes [39].

One key aspect of care coordination is the integration of services across different providers and care settings. This integration helps eliminate fragmentation in care delivery, ensuring that patients can access necessary services without experiencing barriers or delays. By coordinating services, healthcare providers can facilitate smooth transitions between different levels of care, such as hospital to home, and ensure that patients receive appropriate follow-up care and support. Integrated care models, such as Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) and Patient-Centered Medical Homes (PCMHs), have been successful in improving access to care by promoting collaboration and coordination among healthcare providers. These models emphasize care coordination as a central component, resulting in better care

transitions, reduced duplication of services, and improved patient experiences [37,40].

Policy and Practical Implications

To address various barriers and promote patient-centered initiatives, ultimately enhancing access to care for all individuals, policies must go beyond looking good on paper. They must, with practical strategies, embrace reality in action.

Policy Recommendations:

There must be a realistic implementation of legislative changes to expand the scope of practice for certain healthcare professionals, such as nurse practitioners and physician assistants. By removing unnecessary regulatory barriers, these professionals can provide a broader range of services, particularly in underserved areas where there may be a shortage of primary care physicians. This policy change can help improve access to care by increasing the availability of healthcare providers and ensuring that individuals have timely access to necessary services.

Also, the allocation of funding for patient-centered initiatives, such as the establishment of community health centers or the expansion of telehealth services is crucial. Community health centers play a vital role in providing comprehensive, affordable, and culturally competent care to underserved populations. Increasing funding for these centers can help expand their reach and capacity, improving access to care in underserved communities. Additionally, investing in telehealth services can enhance access to care, particularly in rural or remote areas, by leveraging technology to provide virtual healthcare consultations and remote monitoring. Funding for these initiatives can help bridge geographic and socioeconomic barriers, ensuring that individuals can access care regardless of their location or financial resources.

Moreover, providing incentives for care providers who adopt patient-centric care models can also support better access to care. These incentives can include financial rewards or reimbursements for healthcare organizations that demonstrate a commitment to patient-centered principles,

such as shared decision-making, care coordination, and patient engagement. By incentivizing the adoption of patient-centric approaches, healthcare providers are encouraged to prioritize patient needs and preferences, leading to improved access to care that is tailored to individual requirements.

Practical Strategies and Expected Outcomes:

The beginning step could be to provide comprehensive training for healthcare providers on patient-centered communication and shared decision-making. This training equips providers with the necessary skills to effectively engage patients in their care, listen to their needs and preferences, and actively involve them in decision-making processes. By fostering effective communication, healthcare providers can establish trust, enhance patient engagement, and ensure that care aligns with individual values and goals.

Another strategy involves the adoption of technology to improve access to care. Tele health services, for example, can be utilized to overcome geographical barriers and increase access to healthcare, particularly in rural or underserved areas. By leveraging virtual consultations and remote monitoring, patients can access care from the comfort of their homes, reducing the need for travel and improving convenience. Additionally, electronic health records (EHRs) and secure patient portals can facilitate seamless information exchange between healthcare providers, enhancing care coordination and ensuring that patients' medical history and treatment plans are readily accessible.

Organizational changes are also crucial for enhancing access to care within a patient-centric framework. This involves creating a culture that values patient-centered principles and encourages collaboration among healthcare professionals. Implementing care coordination mechanisms, such as interdisciplinary care teams or care navigators, can help ensure the continuity and comprehensiveness of care. Additionally, optimizing appointment scheduling systems and reducing wait times can improve access to timely care, enhancing patient satisfaction and outcomes.

Conclusion

“Access to care” is a critical component of healthcare delivery within a patient-centric care model. It encompasses the availability, affordability, and quality of healthcare services, ensuring that individuals can obtain necessary care. The patient-centric care model prioritizes personalized care, shared decision-making, and a holistic approach to patient well-being. By aligning access to care with the principles of patient-centeredness, healthcare providers and organizations can enhance access by addressing barriers and promoting patient engagement. Practical strategies include training healthcare providers in patient-centered communication, adopting technology for virtual care delivery, and implementing organizational changes that prioritize care coordination and efficiency. These strategies empower healthcare providers to deliver personalized care that respects patients' preferences and values, while also ensuring that individuals can access care conveniently and on time. Ultimately, the relationship between access to care and patient-centric models highlights the importance of comprehensive and patient-centered healthcare delivery that meets the diverse needs and preferences of individuals.

Future research could explore the impact of integrating advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, on enhancing patient engagement and personalizing care within patient-centric models. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of policy interventions aimed at expanding the scope of practice for non-physician providers and their impact on improving access to care in underserved areas could provide valuable insights into addressing healthcare disparities.

Integrating access to care with patient-centric principles is crucial for enhancing overall health outcomes and patient satisfaction, as it ensures that healthcare services are not only available but also personalized, coordinated, and responsive to individual needs and preferences. Hence, the “access to care” in patient-centric care means making care responsive!

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