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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Innovative strategies to tackle healthcare disparities in rural and remote areas

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FULL ARTICLE:

Dear Editor,

We are writing to draw attention to the pressing issue of healthcare disparities in rural and remote areas, and to discuss innovative strategies for improving access to quality care for residents of these underserved regions, which constitute more than 40% of the global population[1]. Healthcare disparities in rural and remote areas have become very pronounced in developing countries, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, which currently is ranked first on the global health inequalities scale[2].

As healthcare professionals and policymakers, it is imperative that we address this issue with the urgency it deserves to ensure equitable health outcomes for all individuals, regardless of their geographic location.

Living in a rural or remote area should not equate to limited access to healthcare services or compromised quality of care. However, the reality is that individuals in these regions often face significant barriers to appropriate health care, leading to poorer health outcomes, exacerbation of existing health disparities, and lower life expectancy rates[3]. Factors such as geographic isolation, ongoing shortage of healthcare workers, limited healthcare infrastructure, and socioeconomic challenges also combine to exacerbate the situation in these areas[4].

To combat these disparities, it is essential to implement innovative strategies that leverage on evidence-based technological interventions. One such strategy is the deployment of blockchain technology for health records. In recent years, blockchain technology has emerged as a promising tool to address healthcare

disparities in remote areas because it enables healthcare providers in rural and remote regions to securely access accurate patient information, even in the absence of traditional infrastructure. This technology not only improves the continuity of care but also enhances patient privacy and data security, overcoming challenges related to paper-based records and unreliable internet connectivity[5].

In addition, the adoption of drone technology for medical supply delivery in remote areas with limited road infrastructure can solve the current logistical nightmare in those areas, enabling rapid and cost-effective delivery of medications, vaccines, and other critical supplies to remote healthcare facilities. Organizations like Zipline have already implemented drone delivery systems in countries like Rwanda and Ghana, significantly reducing delivery times and ensuring timely access to life-saving healthcare resources in rural communities[6].

Another innovative approach that can be adopted is the use of mobile health (mHealth) applications. These applications offer a range of services, including teleconsultations, health education, medication reminders, and appointment scheduling, directly to patients' smartphones. By leveraging mHealth technology, healthcare providers can reach underserved populations, monitor patients remotely, and deliver personalized care, which eradicates some of the barriers to accessing health care in rural and remote areas[7].

Implementing these technologies will require the adoption of a phased approach that prioritizes infrastructure, capacity building, and technology adoption. First, pilot projects leveraging blockchain for secure health records should be launched in select underserved regions to demonstrate scalability and effectiveness. Simultaneously, partnerships with organizations with the technological knowhow and capacity can enable the rapid deployment of drone delivery systems to ensure consistent medical supplies in remote areas. Finally, integrating mHealth applications tailored to unique local needs, supported by training healthcare workers and expanding mobile network coverage, can facilitate widespread access to teleconsultations and health education. Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems should be established to measure impact and guide scaling efforts.

In an era of heightened awareness regarding the far-reaching implications of compromised data privacy, strict adherence to data protection laws and standards is imperative. Ensuring compliance with international frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation and the US *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996* is critical, incorporating robust encryption and multi-factor authentication to secure access to sensitive information. For mHealth applications, the adoption of data minimization, anonymization techniques, and stringent security protocols vetted by reliable technology providers is essential[8]. Furthermore, regular audits, informed consent practices, and community engagement initiatives are pivotal in fostering trust and safeguarding patient data against potential breaches.

By implementing these innovative strategies and prioritizing equitable access to health care for all individuals and remote communities, we can significantly bridge the coverage gap (Fig1), and work towards achieving better health outcomes and reducing disparities in underserved communities.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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