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Global Disparities in ICU Resource Allocation: Lessons from Low and Middle Income Countries

Larissa Gomes*

Department of Critical Care, Vrije University, Belgium

DESCRIPITON

The availability and quality of Intensive Care Units (ICUs) are crucial determinants of healthcare outcomes, particularly for critically ill patients. However, stark disparities exist in ICU resources between High Income Countries (HICs) and Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs). These inequalities, exacerbated by socioeconomic, political, and infrastructural challenges, result in significant variations in patient outcomes. Examining these disparities provides valuable lessons for improving critical care delivery globally. ICU capacity varies dramatically worldwide. HICs typically have well equipped ICUs with advanced technologies, sufficient beds, and highly trained staff. In contrast, LMICs often face severe shortages of ICU beds, ventilators, medications, and skilled personnel. The United States has approximately 25 ICU beds per 100,000 population, whereas many LMICs have less than one bed per 100,000. Access to life-saving equipment such as ventilators and dialysis machines is often limited in LMICs, particularly in rural areas. These disparities became glaringly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when resource limitations in LMICs led to disproportionately higher mortality rates despite comparable disease burden. Limited healthcare budgets in LMICs prioritize primary care and communicable diseases, leaving critical care underfunded. High costs of ICU infrastructure and consumables further exacerbate the issue. The lack of trained intensivists, nurses, and respiratory therapists hinders the effective operation of ICUs. Many healthcare workers migrate to HICs for better opportunities, worsening the brain drain in LMICs. Unreliable electricity, inadequate oxygen supplies, and insufficient access to clean water in some LMICs compromise the functionality of ICUs. Urban-rural disparities in healthcare access mean that ICU care is often concentrated in metropolitan areas, leaving rural populations underserved. Limited understanding of critical care and its benefits among the general population can lead to delays in seeking care, reducing the chances of survival for critically ill patients. Despite these challenges, LMICs have demonstrated resilience and innovation in addressing ICU resource gaps. Training general physicians and nurses in critical care skills has been effective in expanding the workforce. For example, Ethiopia has implemented short-term critical care training programs to upskill healthcare providers. Innovations such as low-cost ventilators and portable oxygen concentrators have made critical care more accessible. Locally manufactured equipment, such as bubble CPAP machines for neonatal care, has saved thousands of lives in LMICs. Remote consultation services supported by experts in HICs have enabled LMICs to provide quality ICU care in resource-constrained settings. For instance, Project ECHO has successfully connected rural hospitals in India with specialists for critical care guidance. Decentralized ICUs that integrate community health workers have improved access in rural areas. Brazil's regional ICU networks have demonstrated the effectiveness of such models. Collaboration between governments, non-profits, and private sectors has facilitated the funding and establishment of ICUs in underserved regions. Efficient use of limited resources is critical. LMICs have displayed cost effective solutions, such as triaging systems to prioritize ICU admissions based on clinical need.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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Corresponding author Larissa Gomes, Department of Critical Care, Vrije University, Belgium, E-mail: larissa_gomes@gmail.com

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