SCOPING REVIEW

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Healthcare System in Saudi Arabia: Evaluating the Impact of Health Policies on Access and Quality of Services – A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT
Background: The healthcare system in Saudi Arabia has rapidly developed over the past few decades, with the implementation of various policies aimed at improving access to and the quality of healthcare services.
Objective: This article is a scoping review that aims to evaluate the impact of health policies on access to and the quality of healthcare services in Saudi Arabia.
Methods: By reviewing existing literature, this article identifies key factors influencing access equity, the quality of care, and the ongoing challenges within the country's healthcare system.
Results: The findings highlight significant issues, including disparities in access between urban and rural areas, variability in service quality, and reliance on foreign medical professionals.
Conclusion: Addressing these challenges is crucial for achieving a more inclusive and sustainable healthcare system in Saudi Arabia. Policymakers must focus on reducing regional disparities, improving healthcare infrastructure, and developing a more self-sufficient medical workforce. Strategic policies and investments will be essential for the continued advancement of the healthcare system and its alignment with Vision 2030.
Keywords: Healthcare System, Health Policies, Healthcare Access, Service Quality, Saudi Arabia.

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia, as one of the largest economies in the Middle East, has long been known for its abundant natural resources, particularly oil. Along with its rapid economic development, the country has also made significant investments in the healthcare sector, which has undergone a major transformation in recent decades. Saudi Arabia's healthcare system, which was once heavily reliant on the private sector, has now evolved into a system driven by government policies that focus on access, quality, and sustainability of healthcare services for all segments of society (Alasiri & Mohammed, 2022).

Since the launch of Vision 2030 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has formulated a series of ambitious healthcare policies aimed at improving the quality of life for its citizens (Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020). This vision not only focuses on economic diversification but also on the reform of the public sector, including healthcare. The Saudi government has allocated substantial funds for healthcare reforms, including the construction of new hospitals, the improvement of healthcare infrastructure in rural areas, and the introduction of the latest medical technologies (Albejaidi & Nair, 2019). This policy aims to create a more inclusive and affordable healthcare system for all citizens, with the hope of providing more equitable access and improving the quality of medical services.

However, despite significant progress, Saudi Arabia's healthcare system still faces several major challenges. One of the main challenges is the unequal access to healthcare services, especially between urban and rural areas. Major cities like Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam have internationally recognized hospitals equipped with advanced technology and trained medical personnel. On the other hand, rural areas and remote regions still face significant difficulties in accessing adequate healthcare services (Mani & Goniewicz, 2024). This gap can exacerbate the health conditions of people outside the cities, as many of them must travel long distances and bear high costs to receive the medical care they need.

Moreover, variability in the quality of services is also a serious concern within Saudi Arabia's healthcare system. While some large hospitals offer high-quality medical services, the standards of care in smaller facilities or those located in less developed areas are often inconsistent (Al-Borie & Damanhouri, 2013). This is influenced by various factors, including a shortage of locally trained medical staff, reliance on foreign medical professionals, and a lack of medical facilities in certain areas. As a result, despite having one of the most advanced healthcare systems in the region, Saudi Arabia still faces challenges related to disparities in service quality that need to be addressed.

The high dependency on foreign medical staff is also a significant challenge to the sustainability of the healthcare system in Saudi Arabia. The healthcare workforce is largely dependent on foreign medical professionals who, despite their skills and experience, face challenges related to continuity and retention (Mohammed, Al, Hamad, & Alyami, 2024). Additionally, this dependency can exacerbate issues in training local medical personnel and developing domestic human resource capacity.

Therefore, while the government's policies have successfully led to improvements in the provision of better medical facilities, challenges related to the healthcare workforce remain a critical issue.

This article aims to conduct a scoping review of the healthcare policies implemented in Saudi Arabia, with a primary focus on their impact on healthcare access and quality. We will explore how these policies have affected the Saudi population and how they play a role in addressing gaps in healthcare access and improving care standards across the country. Furthermore, this article will also discuss the challenges that still need to be addressed, such as disparities between urban and rural areas, dependence on foreign medical staff, and efforts to ensure equitable healthcare quality across the system. Therefore, this article not only reviews existing policies but also provides insights into the future direction of Saudi Arabia's healthcare system towards greater inclusivity and sustainability.

Through this scoping review, we hope to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Saudi Arabia's healthcare system and offer recommendations that will be useful for policymakers and other stakeholders in formulating more effective healthcare policies that are responsive to the needs of the population. By focusing on healthcare access and quality, this article seeks to present a clearer picture of the challenges and opportunities faced by Saudi Arabia's healthcare system in its efforts to achieve Vision 2030.

METHODS

This scoping review aims to explore and analyze relevant literature regarding healthcare policies in Saudi Arabia, particularly focusing on their impact on healthcare access and quality. We reviewed articles published over the past 10 years, as healthcare policies in Saudi Arabia have undergone significant changes following the launch of Vision 2030 and other reform initiatives (Alasiri & Mohammed, 2022). The methodology of this scoping review follows systematic steps to identify, evaluate, and analyze articles that meet the predefined inclusion criteria (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Inclusion Criteria

The articles selected for this scoping review were chosen based on specific inclusion criteria. First, they must address healthcare policies implemented in Saudi Arabia, particularly focusing on healthcare access and quality. Only articles published between 2015 and 2025 were included to ensure relevance to current policies. The review also considered peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and policy studies, all of which were deemed appropriate sources for the topic. Additionally, the selected articles needed to consider geographical, economic, and demographic factors, such as the urban-rural divide, as well as the economic and demographic dimensions that impact the effectiveness of healthcare policies.

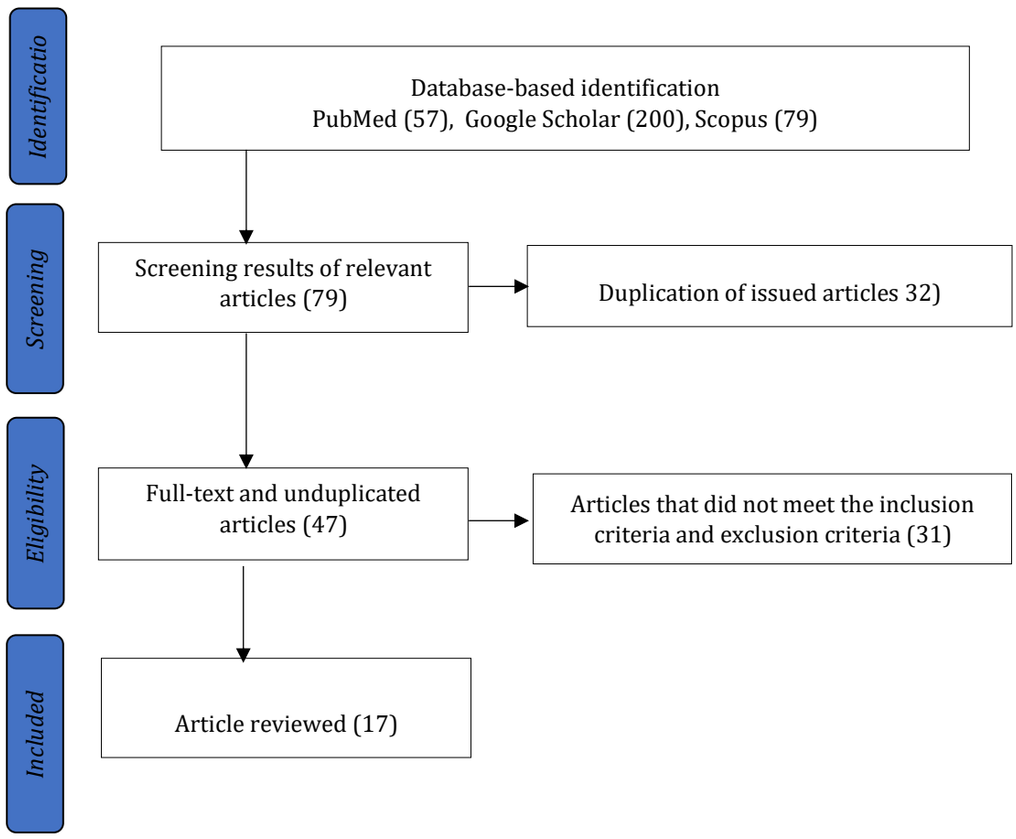

Figure 1. Flowchart

Literature Search Procedure

The literature search for this scoping review was carried out across several key databases that offer articles pertinent to the subject under investigation. PubMed was used to locate scholarly articles addressing healthcare policies and their impact on access and quality of medical services. Google Scholar provided access to a broad range of sources, including policy reports and non-journal publications. Scopus was utilized to identify

academic studies with rigorous methodologies that might not have been captured in the other databases. The search was conducted using specific keywords such as "health policy in Saudi Arabia," "access to healthcare," "healthcare quality," and "Saudi Arabia healthcare system" to ensure the relevance of the articles retrieved for the review's focus (Alasiri & Mohammed, 2022).

Article Selection

Once the literature search was completed, the retrieved articles were evaluated according to the established inclusion criteria. The article selection process consisted of two stages. The first stage involved title and abstract screening, where the initial articles were reviewed to ensure their relevance to the research focus. The second stage was full-text screening, where articles that passed the initial screening were accessed in full. These were evaluated in greater detail, considering their content relevance, the methodology used, and their direct connection to the impact of healthcare policies on access to and quality of healthcare services in Saudi Arabia. Only articles that directly and comprehensively discussed healthcare policies were included in the final review. (Alasiri & Mohammed, 2022).

Data Analysis

Each article meeting the inclusion criteria was analyzed to identify key themes related to healthcare access and quality, as well as the policies implemented in Saudi Arabia. The data analysis process involved the following steps:

1. Theme Coding: Articles were analyzed qualitatively to identify major themes such as access disparities in rural areas, quality of medical services, dependence on foreign medical staff, and the role of government policies in addressing these issues (Mani & Goniewicz, 2024).
2. Synthesis of Findings: Findings from each article were then synthesized to provide a comprehensive overview of how healthcare policies have impacted the healthcare system in Saudi Arabia as a whole (Albejaidi & Nair, 2019).
3. Policy Mapping: We also identified key policies implemented by the Saudi government and analyzed their impact on the population, particularly in terms of healthcare access and the quality of care provided (Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020).

Presentation of Results

The results of the data analysis will be presented in the form of a thematic summary that explains the impact of healthcare policies on access and quality of services across various regions of Saudi Arabia. These findings will provide insights into the challenges and successes of the policies implemented, as well as policy recommendations for future improvements (Alasiri & Mohammed, 2022; Mohammed et al., 2024).

RESULTS

Health Service Access Inequality

One of the main findings from this scoping review is the inequality in access between urban and rural areas in Saudi Arabia. Despite various efforts to improve the quality of healthcare, especially through major policies such as Vision 2030, disparities in access to healthcare services remain a significant issue (Alluhaymid & Alabdrabalnabi, 2023). Large cities like Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam have excellent healthcare facilities, with modern hospitals equipped with the latest medical technology and highly trained healthcare professionals. Hospitals in these areas often offer services that meet international standards, with specialties in various medical fields, as well as infrastructure capable of handling various types of diseases and health conditions (Al-Ahmadi & Roland, 2005)

However, this situation is vastly different in rural or more remote areas. People in these areas often face limited access to adequate medical facilities. Healthcare infrastructure in remote regions is often far from the expected standards, with few hospitals and a shortage of trained medical staff. Many of these facilities can only handle basic medical cases and often lack the specialists needed to manage more complex diseases. Limited transportation access also adds an additional barrier for rural populations to obtain timely medical care. Patients with serious illnesses must travel long distances to larger cities for treatment, which is often unaffordable for the majority of the population (Albalawi et al., 2024). As a result, this health inequality exacerbates the living conditions of rural communities and increases the risk of death from diseases that could be treated with better access to healthcare.

This disparity also affects the quality of life for people in rural areas. Many residents suffer from chronic or long-term medical conditions but are unable to receive adequate care. This leads to prolonged suffering that can reduce their productivity and overall well-being. Therefore, it is crucial for existing health policies to focus on improving healthcare infrastructure in underserved areas, as well as expanding accessibility to quality health services (Albalawi et al., 2024).

Variability in Service Quality

In addition to access inequality, another important finding is the variability in the quality of healthcare services across different regions of Saudi Arabia. While hospitals in major cities like Riyadh and Jeddah provide medical care according to international standards, the quality of services in smaller hospitals or those in less developed areas is often inconsistent. This variability reflects disparities in resources available at different medical facilities,

which in turn affects the quality of care received by patients (Alghaith et al., 2020).

Many smaller hospitals and clinics in more remote areas or on the outskirts of cities often lack modern medical equipment and do not have trained medical personnel. Furthermore, these hospitals often face financial constraints that hinder the upgrading of facilities or hiring skilled medical staff. This condition potentially lowers the quality of care, especially for patients needing further treatment or managing more complex medical conditions. Moreover, the dependence on foreign medical staff plays a role in this variability, as foreign professionals are often placed in urban areas with better medical facilities, while more remote areas may lack foreign staff or trained local healthcare professionals (Al-Hanawi, Khan, & Al-Borie, 2019).

Even in major cities, there are differences in the quality of healthcare services depending on the available facilities and the type of care provided. Large government-supported hospitals tend to offer more standardized services focused on quality, while smaller private hospitals may offer lower costs at the expense of care quality. This variation leads to uncertainty in the patient experience and potentially diminishes public trust in the healthcare system overall. Therefore, it is important for health policies to encourage the standardization of service quality across all healthcare facilities, ensuring that every patient, regardless of where they live, can access safe and effective care (Al Rahhaleh, Al-Khyal, Alahmari, & Al-Hanawi, 2023).

Dependence on Foreign Healthcare Workers

One key factor contributing to the inequality in service quality is the high dependence on foreign healthcare workers in Saudi Arabia. The country heavily relies on foreign professionals, particularly to fill key positions in hospitals and clinics nationwide. While foreign healthcare workers bring valuable skills and experience, this dependence creates significant challenges in terms of retention and consistency of service quality (Rahman, 2020). According to various studies reviewed in this paper, many foreign healthcare workers come to Saudi Arabia for a limited period and return to their home countries once their contracts end. This creates a high turnover rate among medical staff, which often disrupts the continuity of services and affects the quality of care provided to patients (De Vries et al., 2023).

In addition, the limited training capacity for local healthcare workers is a major issue. Although Saudi Arabia has several universities and health training institutions that have produced local healthcare professionals, the number of trained professionals within the country is still insufficient to meet the needs of the growing population. This limitation increases reliance on foreign healthcare workers, who often come from countries with different training systems. The consistency of care is frequently affected by differences in experience and skills among foreign professionals from diverse backgrounds (Al-Hanawi, 2017).

To address this issue, it is crucial for the Saudi government to enhance the training capacity for local healthcare workers and design more effective policies to retain foreign medical staff in the long term. Additionally, efforts should be made to reduce dependence on foreign healthcare workers by developing a more self-sustaining training system and supporting knowledge transfer between foreign and local healthcare staff (Al-Hanawi, 2017).

DISCUSSION

Disparities in Access and Their Impact on Public Health in Saudi Arabia

Disparities in healthcare access between urban and rural areas in Saudi Arabia remain a significant issue that demands serious attention. Although the country has implemented various large-scale initiatives, such as Vision 2030, to enhance infrastructure in remote areas, major challenges persist in terms of geographical accessibility and the cost burdens faced by residents in these areas when seeking adequate healthcare services (Alfaqeeh, Cook, Randhawa, & Ali, 2017). For individuals living in rural or remote regions, long journeys to larger cities often become inevitable when seeking better medical care. This situation not only impacts their quality of life but also worsens health awareness levels and the management of more complex health conditions (AlFaleh et al., 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to focus on redistributing resources and improving medical infrastructure across all regions in order to achieve equitable healthcare access throughout Saudi Arabia (Althumairi, Bukhari, Awary, & Aljabri, 2023).

Provision of Quality Healthcare: Inequality and Sustainability Challenges

Not only is there an issue with access, but the inequality in the quality of services between hospitals in large cities and medical facilities in smaller areas further compounds the challenges facing Saudi Arabia's healthcare system (Alanazi et al., 2023). Hospitals in major cities like Riyadh and Jeddah have access to advanced medical equipment and highly trained medical personnel. In contrast, rural hospitals often lack the facilities and resources necessary to handle complex medical cases. The quality of care at these facilities often fails to meet expected standards, forcing patients in need of specialized care to travel long distances to larger cities. A primary cause of this quality variability is the lack of consistent oversight and accreditation across hospitals, particularly in medical facilities located in more remote areas (Hazazi & Wilson,

2022). Therefore, strengthening international accreditation and implementing stricter standards across all medical facilities is crucial to ensuring that healthcare quality is consistent, not only in big cities but also in more isolated regions (Almasabi & Thomas, 2017).

Dependence on Foreign Medical Personnel: Ensuring the Stability of the Healthcare System

Another critical issue is dependence on foreign medical personnel in Saudi Arabia (Thalib, Zobairi, Javed, Ansari, & Alshanberi, 2024). While foreign healthcare workers have played a vital role in meeting the country's healthcare needs, this dependence could threaten the long-term stability of the healthcare system. Many foreign healthcare workers employed in Saudi Arabia work under limited-term contracts and often return to their home countries once their contracts end, leaving vacancies that are difficult to fill (Binkheder, Aldekhyyel, & Almulhem, 2021). Additionally, differences in medical culture and practice standards can affect the consistency of services provided to patients (Alkhamees et al., 2023). To reduce this dependence, Saudi Arabia needs to invest more in local medical education and create long-term incentives for Saudi medical professionals to remain in the country (Yusuf & Rajeh, 2022). This not only enhances the quality of healthcare services but also strengthens the sustainability of the healthcare system in the long run.

Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs): The Biggest Threat to Public Health Beyond issues of access and quality, another increasingly urgent problem is the high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Saudi Arabia (Mustapha et al., 2014). Diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases have become significant burdens on the country's healthcare system (Al-Nozha et al., 2007). NCDs are largely attributed to unhealthy lifestyle changes, including poor dietary habits and lack of physical activity. Saudi Arabia now faces a dual challenge: managing the burden of infectious diseases while simultaneously tackling the rising prevalence of NCDs. Although the Saudi government has implemented various prevention programs, these efforts have not been sufficient to significantly reduce the prevalence of NCDs in the population (Hirashiki et al., 2022). Therefore, a more holistic and integrated approach is needed to address NCDs, such as improving public health education, launching broader health campaigns, and enhancing rehabilitation and treatment facilities for NCD patients (Sheerah, Almuzaini, & Khan, 2023).

The discussion surrounding disparities in access to healthcare, reliance on foreign medical personnel, and the rising prevalence of NCDs in Saudi Arabia highlights the significant challenges the country faces in creating a more equitable and sustainable healthcare system. By addressing issues related to accessibility, improving care quality, reducing dependence on foreign healthcare workers, and tackling the rising tide of non-communicable diseases, Saudi Arabia can build a healthcare system that is better equipped to meet the needs of its population, both in urban centers and remote areas.

Conclusion

The healthcare system in Saudi Arabia has made significant progress, but there are still many challenges that need to be addressed, particularly regarding unequal access, variability in service quality, and dependence on foreign medical staff. Existing policies have had a positive impact, but to achieve equity in healthcare services, further efforts are needed in terms of resource distribution, training of local healthcare professionals, and improving infrastructure in rural areas. With a strategy that focuses more on disease prevention and ensuring more equitable service provision, Saudi Arabia's healthcare system can become more inclusive and sustainable in facing future health challenges.

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