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Midwives' crucial role in combatting maternal mortality

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Abstract

Maternal mortality remains a significant global health challenge, with substantial disparities in outcomes between high-income and low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs). Despite advancements in healthcare, the reduction of maternal deaths has been slow, indicating a need for focused interventions. Midwives play a pivotal role in this context, offering a spectrum of care that extends from antepartum to postpartum periods. This review synthesizes evidence on the impact of midwives in reducing maternal mortality, underscoring the importance of their expertise, the scope of practice, and the challenges faced in various settings.

Keywords: Maternal mortality, Global health challenge, Disparities

Introduction

In the global quest to improve maternal health outcomes, the role of midwives emerges as both critical and transformative. Maternal mortality remains a pressing issue worldwide, with vast disparities in outcomes between high-income countries and low- to middle-income regions. Despite significant advancements in medical technology and healthcare services, the World Health Organization reports that approximately 830 women die every day due to preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. This alarming statistic underscores the urgency of addressing maternal mortality and highlights the pivotal role that midwives play in this endeavor.

Midwives, as specialists in normal pregnancy and childbirth, offer a unique blend of care that is both holistic and evidence-based. Their approach extends beyond the delivery of babies to encompass comprehensive reproductive, maternal, and newborn health services. This includes antenatal care, birth preparation, delivery support, postnatal care, and family planning. Midwives are trained to recognize and manage potential complications, thereby ensuring timely interventions that can save lives. Their knowledge and skills in promoting healthy practices during pregnancy and the postnatal period are invaluable in preventing maternal and neonatal deaths.

Moreover, the accessibility and community-based nature of midwifery care make it a crucial element in reaching underserved populations. In many parts of the world, midwives serve as the primary, if not sole, healthcare providers available to women during childbirth. Their ability to deliver care in diverse settings - from hospitals to remote home births - enables them to reach women who might otherwise be left out of the healthcare system.

Investing in midwifery education, regulation, and practice has been identified as a cost-effective strategy to improve maternal and neonatal outcomes. Studies have shown that adequately resourced midwifery care can prevent up to two-thirds of maternal and newborn deaths. Yet, the potential of midwives is often underutilized due to challenges such as inadequate training, insufficient numbers, and lack of integration into national health systems.

The focus on midwives' crucial role in combating maternal mortality is not just about acknowledging their contributions; it's about recognizing their potential to lead change. As we delve deeper into this subject, it becomes evident that empowering midwives and elevating their status within healthcare systems is not merely a matter of improving maternal and newborn health outcomes - it is a fundamental step towards achieving gender equality, promoting human rights, and realizing sustainable development goals.

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Main Objective

The main objective of the paper is to examine and highlight the critical role that midwives play in reducing maternal mortality rates globally.

The Global Challenge of Maternal Mortality

The global challenge of maternal mortality remains one of the most serious public health issues, revealing stark inequalities between and within countries. It reflects the ability of health systems to provide quality care to women before, during, and after childbirth. Despite significant efforts and progress in some areas, maternal mortality rates (MMRs) highlight the need for continued focus and intervention.

Maternal mortality refers to deaths due to complications from pregnancy or childbirth. The World Health Organization (WHO) has outlined several primary causes, including severe bleeding, infections, high blood pressure during pregnancy (pre-eclampsia and eclampsia), complications from delivery, and unsafe abortion. The disparity in maternal mortality rates between developed and developing countries is profound, with a significant majority of deaths occurring in low-resource settings, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

The WHO reported in 2019 that approximately 810 women died every day due to preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. This statistic underscores the vast global health divide.

Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia bear the brunt of maternal deaths, accounting for approximately 86% of the worldwide total. Within these regions, countries like Nigeria and India together account for over a third of global maternal deaths.

A comprehensive analysis by the Lancet in 2016 highlighted that over 70% of maternal deaths are due to direct obstetric causes such as hemorrhage, hypertension, and sepsis. The remaining deaths result from pre-existing medical conditions exacerbated by pregnancy.

Studies also emphasize the critical role of healthcare access, quality of care, socioeconomic factors, and cultural practices in influencing maternal health outcomes.

Despite global efforts, progress in reducing maternal mortality has been uneven. The high rates of maternal mortality in many developing countries are a stark reminder of the inequality in health care access and quality. Addressing this challenge requires a multifaceted approach that includes improving healthcare infrastructure, ensuring universal access to reproductive health services, enhancing the quality of care, and addressing broader socioeconomic determinants of health.

Significant reductions in maternal mortality are possible through concerted global, national, and local efforts. This includes the implementation of evidence-based interventions, strengthening health systems, empowering women, and leveraging technology and innovation in healthcare. Continued research and investment in maternal health are critical to achieving the SDG targets and ensuring that all women have access to the care they need to survive pregnancy and childbirth.

Role of Midwives in Maternal Healthcare

Midwives play an indispensable role in the landscape of maternal healthcare, standing on the front lines of reducing maternal and neonatal mortality across the globe. Their

comprehensive training and holistic approach to care enable them to offer essential support, education, and medical services to women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period. Midwives are not only skilled in assisting births; they are also trained to recognize early signs of complications and manage or refer cases that require advanced medical intervention. This dual capacity to provide primary care and act as a bridge to more specialized services is crucial, particularly in resource-limited settings where access to hospitals and doctors may be challenging. The importance of midwives extends beyond the delivery room. They conduct antenatal visits, which are vital for monitoring the health of the mother and the fetus, providing nutritional advice, and preparing the mother for childbirth. They also play a key role in offering postnatal care, supporting breastfeeding, ensuring the well-being of the newborn, and monitoring the mother's health post-delivery. This period is critical, as many complications can arise for both the mother and the baby.

In many parts of the world, particularly in rural and underserved areas, midwives are the primary healthcare providers for pregnant women, making their role crucial in the fight against maternal mortality. They are often part of the community they serve, which positions them uniquely to advocate for women's health, bridge cultural practices with medical advice, and build trust within the community. This trust is essential for encouraging women to seek care during pregnancy and childbirth.

Research has consistently shown that when midwives are part of an integrated healthcare team, maternal and neonatal outcomes improve significantly. For instance, a series of studies published by The Lancet in 2014 highlighted that effective coverage of midwife-led care could avert over 80% of all maternal deaths, stillbirths, and neonatal deaths. The presence of a skilled midwife during delivery has been identified as one of the most critical factors in preventing maternal deaths.

However, the potential of midwives is often hindered by challenges such as inadequate training, insufficient resources, and lack of professional recognition. Strengthening midwifery involves investment in education and training, ensuring they have the tools and support needed to provide quality care, and integrating their services into the broader healthcare system.

In conclusion, midwives are vital to maternal and neonatal health, offering a range of services that go far beyond assisting with childbirth. Their role in providing comprehensive reproductive, maternal, and newborn health care is a cornerstone of efforts to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality worldwide. Empowering and investing in midwives is not just a strategy for improving health outcomes; it's a commitment to respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the rights of women and children across the globe.

Conclusion

Midwives play an indispensable role in reducing maternal mortality, serving not just as caregivers but as vital components of the healthcare system focused on mothers and babies. By providing skilled care during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period, midwives ensure safer deliveries and contribute significantly to the health and well-being of mothers and their newborns. Their expertise in recognizing and managing complications early, along with their promotion of healthy practices, has proven to be

crucial in preventing maternal deaths. Moreover, midwives are often the primary source of support and education for women during their reproductive years, offering advice on family planning, nutrition, and preventive health measures. The presence of well-trained and supported midwives in communities, especially in rural or underserved areas, is key to achieving global targets for reducing maternal mortality. As such, investments in midwifery education, regulation, and integration into the health system are essential for building resilient healthcare infrastructures that can meet the needs of women and families, ensuring no one is left behind. The evidence is clear: empowering midwives and enhancing their role within healthcare systems is not just beneficial but necessary for combatting maternal mortality worldwide.

Conflict of Interest

Not available

Financial Support

Not available

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