

Rare Diseases as a Global Public Health Priority: Challenges and Opportunities

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Received: 04-10-2024; Revised: 21-10-2024; Accepted: 15-11-2024; Published: 02-12-2024

Abstract

Rare diseases, while affecting a small proportion of the global population, pose significant challenges to public health due to their complexity, the limited availability of effective treatments, and the knowledge gaps that exist regarding their diagnosis and management. As these diseases are often underfunded and understudied, they frequently receive insufficient attention in public health agendas. However, the increasing recognition of rare diseases as a global public health priority reflects a shift towards understanding their broader impact and the need for more comprehensive responses. This abstract discusses the multifaceted challenges associated with rare diseases, including diagnostic delays, limited treatment options, disparities in access to care, and the economic burden they impose. It also highlights the opportunities for progress through advancements in genomics, international collaborations, and patient-centered approaches. By addressing these challenges and leveraging the emerging opportunities, there is potential to significantly improve the quality of life for those affected by rare diseases and to enhance global health systems' capacity to respond to this growing issue.

Keywords: *Rare Diseases, Global Public Health, Diagnostic Delays, Limited Treatment Options, Access Disparities, Genomic Medicine, International Collaboration, Patient-Centered Care, Health Policy.*

1. Introduction

Rare diseases, affecting a small percentage of the population worldwide, present a unique set of challenges and opportunities within the realm of global public health. Despite being individually rare, collectively these diseases impact millions of people, creating a significant burden on healthcare systems and societies. The complexity of rare diseases, often characterized by diverse symptoms and genetic origins, makes diagnosis difficult and treatment options limited. This complexity, combined with a lack of public awareness and resources, exacerbates the challenge of providing timely and effective care. The growing recognition of rare diseases as a global priority underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that incorporate advancements in genomics, cross-border research collaborations, and targeted health policies(1). By addressing these challenges, such as diagnostic delays and disparities in access to care, and leveraging the opportunities presented by new technologies and patient advocacy, the global health community can make significant strides in improving the quality of life for those affected by rare diseases and in advancing the overall responsiveness of health systems to these often neglected conditions.

The increasing recognition of rare diseases as a global public health priority marks a pivotal shift in how healthcare systems and societies approach these conditions. Traditionally underfunded and under-researched, rare diseases have often been overlooked in broader health agendas, leading to significant gaps in knowledge, diagnosis, and treatment. The challenges faced by individuals with rare diseases are multifaceted; from long diagnostic journeys and lack of effective therapies to the social stigma and economic impact associated with these conditions. The international community has started to respond through enhanced awareness campaigns, the development of specialized treatment centers, and the establishment of rare disease registries. However, the complexity of these diseases and the variations in access to healthcare across regions require a more coordinated effort. Advances in genomics, personalized medicine, and international collaborations present promising opportunities to address these challenges. By focusing on a patient-centered approach, fostering innovative research, and implementing supportive policies, there is potential to significantly reduce the impact of rare diseases on global public health and improve the lives of millions worldwide(2).

2. Literature Survey

Rare Diseases as a Global Public Health Priority: Challenges and Opportunities

The literature on rare diseases as a global public health priority highlights significant challenges, particularly in diagnosis, treatment, and access to care. Despite advances in genetic research and diagnostic technologies, many rare diseases remain poorly understood, leading to prolonged diagnostic delays. According to a study by Patel et al. (2020), up to 70% of patients with rare diseases experience a delay of 5 years or more before obtaining a correct diagnosis. This delay can negatively impact patient outcomes due to the progression of symptoms and limited treatment options. Furthermore, disparities in healthcare access across countries exacerbate the issue, as individuals in low- and middle-income countries often face greater barriers to receiving appropriate diagnostic and therapeutic interventions. The lack of standardized global criteria for diagnosis and treatment further complicates the situation, making it essential for international collaboration to develop comprehensive guidelines that can improve care standards worldwide(3).

Research in the field of rare diseases also underscores the economic and ethical challenges associated with these conditions. The high cost of treatments, compounded by the small market size for many rare diseases, makes it difficult for healthcare systems to afford effective therapies. A study by Smith and Lee (2019) highlights that orphan drugs, which are often the only treatment options for rare diseases, can be up to 10 times more expensive than conventional drugs. This economic burden raises ethical questions about prioritization of resources, especially in regions with limited healthcare budgets. The need for innovative funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships and government subsidies, is critical to ensure equitable access to these life-saving treatments. Moreover, the ethical implications of rare disease research, particularly in terms of patient consent and privacy, must be addressed through robust regulatory frameworks to safeguard patient rights and support responsible scientific advancement.

Advancements in genomics and personalized medicine are providing new opportunities to address the challenges of rare diseases. The integration of genomic technologies in diagnostics and treatment planning has revolutionized the field, allowing for more precise identification of genetic mutations associated with specific rare conditions. According to a report by the Global Rare Diseases Patient Registry, over 80% of rare diseases have a genetic basis, and whole-exome sequencing has become an invaluable tool for diagnosis. This shift towards precision medicine enables earlier and more accurate diagnosis, improving patient outcomes. However, there remains a need for greater standardization in genetic testing and data sharing to facilitate cross-border research and clinical trials. International collaboration, such as the International Rare Diseases Research Consortium (IRDiRC), plays a crucial role in advancing these efforts by pooling resources and expertise from around the world.

Patient advocacy and international cooperation are critical to addressing the global nature of rare diseases. Patient organizations and support networks have become increasingly influential in raising awareness, sharing information, and advocating for better policies and care options. The establishment of rare disease networks, such as EURORDIS, has enabled patients and caregivers to collaborate across borders, ensuring that their voices are heard in health policy discussions(4). These networks facilitate the sharing of knowledge, promote research initiatives, and help coordinate care through specialized centers of excellence. However, challenges remain in translating this advocacy into meaningful policy changes, particularly in countries with less developed healthcare infrastructures. The role of governments and international organizations is vital in creating an enabling environment for rare disease management through legislation, funding, and support for research and patient-centered care.

The literature also explores the role of digital technologies and health informatics in transforming the landscape of rare disease management. Electronic health records (EHRs), telemedicine, and patient registries are becoming essential tools for tracking and managing rare diseases. The use of digital platforms to connect patients, healthcare providers, and researchers has facilitated the collection of data for clinical trials, making it easier to identify patterns and potential treatments. According to a study by Johnson et al. (2021), the use of digital tools has accelerated the recruitment process for rare disease trials, allowing for faster enrollment and data collection. Moreover, the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning in analyzing patient data holds promise for developing predictive models that can assist in early diagnosis and personalized treatment planning. As these technologies become more integrated into healthcare systems worldwide, they offer new pathways for improving the accessibility, quality, and efficiency of rare disease care(5).

3. Existing and Proposed System

The existing system for managing rare diseases globally faces numerous challenges, primarily due to the fragmented approach to diagnosis, treatment, and care. In many countries, there is a lack of standardized protocols and

guidelines for the diagnosis and treatment of rare diseases, which can lead to misdiagnoses and inadequate care. Specialized centers of excellence for rare diseases are few and often not well-connected across borders, limiting access to expert care. For instance, in the United States, the National Organization for Rare Disorders (NORD) provides a valuable network for patients and caregivers, yet access to such networks is limited in many countries. Additionally, the reliance on off-label use of medications and therapies in the absence of approved treatments highlights a gap in the system's ability to meet the needs of rare disease patients. The existing system also struggles with the high costs of orphan drugs and the limited reimbursement mechanisms available, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. As a result, many patients face financial hardship and are unable to access necessary treatments, underscoring the need for innovative policies and approaches to support rare disease management globally.

To address the existing gaps in the global rare disease management system, several proposals have been put forward to create a more integrated and equitable approach. One key proposal is the establishment of a global rare disease registry that would collect standardized data from multiple countries, allowing for comprehensive research and epidemiological studies(6). This registry would help in tracking the prevalence and progression of rare diseases, thereby supporting better diagnostic and treatment protocols. Another proposal is to enhance international collaboration through the creation of virtual networks that link healthcare providers, researchers, and patient organizations across borders. These networks would facilitate knowledge sharing, joint research initiatives, and the development of treatment guidelines. Additionally, there is a call for global funding mechanisms, such as a rare disease investment fund, to provide financial support for drug development, clinical trials, and patient care in underserved regions. By focusing on patient-centered care, ensuring access to diagnostic tools and therapies, and fostering international cooperation, the proposed system aims to improve the outcomes for rare disease patients worldwide and reduce disparities in care.

4. Global Burden of Rare Diseases

The global burden of rare diseases represents a significant and often overlooked challenge in public health. Despite affecting a relatively small percentage of the population individually, rare diseases collectively impact millions of people worldwide, creating a substantial burden on health systems, societies, and economies. These diseases are defined by their low prevalence, often fewer than 1 in 2,000 individuals affected by each specific condition. However, there are over 7,000 identified rare diseases, making the combined prevalence significant—approximately 5-8% of the global population may be affected by one or more rare diseases at any given time.

Challenges in Diagnosis and Treatment

One of the primary challenges in managing rare diseases is the difficulty in diagnosis. Many rare diseases are complex and present with non-specific symptoms, making them difficult to identify without extensive testing and expert knowledge. The average diagnostic delay for a rare disease patient can be 5-7 years, during which time patients often undergo multiple misdiagnoses. This delay can result in the progression of the disease, further complicating treatment efforts and potentially leading to irreversible damage. Additionally, limited treatment options are available, with only about 5% of rare diseases having FDA-approved therapies. For those that do, the cost of treatment can be prohibitive, with some orphan drugs priced hundreds of times higher than standard medications. This economic burden is compounded by limited reimbursement mechanisms in many countries, making access to these life-saving treatments uneven(7).

Access Disparities

Access to specialized care for rare diseases varies greatly between countries and regions, reflecting disparities in healthcare infrastructure and economic resources. In high-income countries, specialized centers for rare diseases are more prevalent, offering multidisciplinary care and genetic counseling. However, in low- and middle-income countries, such access is often lacking, leaving patients without adequate diagnosis and treatment options. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 80% of rare disease patients live in low- and middle-income countries, where healthcare systems are less equipped to manage complex conditions. The lack of international cooperation and standardized treatment protocols exacerbates these disparities, as patients may face different care standards depending on their geographic location.

Rare Diseases as a Global Public Health Priority: Challenges and Opportunities

Economic Impact

The economic impact of rare diseases is substantial, affecting not only the individuals and families directly involved but also national healthcare systems and economies. The cost of orphan drugs is a significant factor, with prices often reaching hundreds of thousands of dollars per year per patient. This high cost is not sustainable for many countries, leading to limited access to treatment and care(8). Moreover, the indirect costs of rare diseases, such as loss of productivity, need for long-term care, and special education services, are often underestimated. Studies have shown that patients with rare diseases may face high out-of-pocket expenses, often leading to financial hardship. The burden on caregivers is also considerable, with many providing unpaid care, which can impact their own health and economic stability.

Opportunities for Improvement

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to address the global burden of rare diseases through concerted efforts. Advances in genomics and personalized medicine offer promising avenues for earlier and more accurate diagnosis. The use of whole-exome sequencing and genome-wide association studies (GWAS) has enabled the identification of new disease genes and the development of diagnostic tests. International collaborations, such as the International Rare Diseases Research Consortium (IRDiRC), provide platforms for sharing data and research findings, accelerating the development of treatments. Additionally, patient advocacy groups play a crucial role in raising awareness, influencing policy, and providing support to patients and families. Governments and healthcare systems can further support these efforts by investing in research, enhancing healthcare infrastructure, and developing policies that promote equitable access to care.

The Role of Digital Health Technologies

Digital health technologies, including electronic health records (EHRs), telemedicine, and health informatics, are playing an increasingly important role in managing rare diseases. These technologies facilitate remote monitoring, teleconsultations, and the collection of real-time data from patients, allowing for personalized treatment plans. Digital platforms also enable the creation of rare disease registries, which can improve understanding of disease prevalence, progression, and treatment response. Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are being used to analyze vast amounts of patient data, identify patterns, and predict disease trajectories. This data-driven approach not only helps in the development of new treatments but also enhances the ability of healthcare providers to make informed decisions in the absence of clinical trial data for many rare diseases(9).

Call to Action

To address the global burden of rare diseases, a multi-faceted approach is required. Governments, healthcare providers, patient organizations, and the pharmaceutical industry must work together to create a unified strategy that includes improving diagnostic capabilities, ensuring access to effective treatments, and promoting international cooperation. Investment in research and development of orphan drugs, the establishment of global registries, and the implementation of supportive policies are essential steps towards reducing the impact of rare diseases on individuals and societies. Public awareness campaigns are also crucial to educate the public and healthcare professionals about rare diseases, thereby reducing diagnostic delays and fostering a more responsive health system. The global community must prioritize rare diseases as a public health issue to ensure that the advancements in science and technology translate into tangible benefits for those affected by these conditions.

5. Problems that the RD population faces

Individuals affected by rare diseases face a multitude of challenges that impact their lives, health, and overall well-being. These challenges are compounded by the rarity of their conditions, which often leads to inadequate awareness, limited access to diagnosis and treatment, and significant socioeconomic burdens. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective strategies to support the RD population and improve their quality of life.

1. Diagnostic Delays and Challenges

One of the most significant challenges faced by the RD population is the lengthy and complex diagnostic process. Due to the low prevalence of each rare disease, many healthcare professionals lack familiarity with these conditions, leading to delays in diagnosis and misdiagnoses. The average diagnostic delay for rare diseases is estimated to be 5-7 years, with some patients experiencing even longer delays. This delay not only prolongs suffering but also prevents timely interventions that could improve health outcomes. The lack of standardized diagnostic criteria and protocols exacerbates this issue, as patients may need to undergo multiple tests and consultations before obtaining a correct

diagnosis. This prolonged diagnostic journey can lead to irreversible damage, particularly in progressive rare diseases.

2. Limited Treatment Options

Access to effective treatment for rare diseases is another major challenge. Only a small percentage of rare diseases have approved therapies, and even when treatments are available, they are often specialized, costly, and not widely accessible. Orphan drugs, designed for rare diseases, tend to be significantly more expensive than standard medications. In the United States, for example, the average cost of an orphan drug is around \$150,000 per patient per year, which is unaffordable for many patients and healthcare systems. Additionally, the lack of reimbursement policies in some countries further limits access to these critical treatments. The rarity of diseases means that pharmaceutical companies may not invest in developing new treatments due to the small market size, leaving many patients without options(10).

3. Healthcare Access and Disparities

The RD population often faces disparities in healthcare access, especially in low- and middle-income countries. These patients typically lack access to specialized care, genetic testing, and multidisciplinary treatment centers that are more readily available in high-income countries. According to the World Health Organization, 80% of rare disease patients live in developing countries, where healthcare infrastructure is inadequate to support complex diagnostic and treatment needs. Geographic barriers, insufficient healthcare resources, and a lack of awareness among healthcare providers about rare diseases contribute to these disparities. For many, traveling to specialized centers in other regions is the only option, creating a financial and logistical burden that is not feasible for all families.

4. Economic and Socioeconomic Burden

The economic impact on the RD population is profound, affecting not only patients but also their families and societies. High out-of-pocket expenses for treatments, medical care, and therapies can lead to financial hardship, especially in countries without adequate social safety nets or reimbursement mechanisms. The indirect costs, such as loss of employment due to caregiving responsibilities, reduced productivity, and special education services, further compound the economic burden. In addition, caregivers often face significant stress and reduced quality of life, as they balance work, family, and caregiving duties. The economic impact also extends to healthcare systems, which may struggle to manage the long-term care needs of rare disease patients without adequate funding and resources(11).

5. Psychosocial Impact and Quality of Life

Living with a rare disease can have a profound psychosocial impact on patients and their families. Many individuals experience feelings of isolation, as their conditions are not well understood by the general public and even by some healthcare professionals. This isolation can lead to social stigma, reduced self-esteem, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The uncertainty about the progression of the disease and the lack of effective treatments can create a constant state of stress and impact daily life. Additionally, the chronic nature of many rare diseases means that patients often face lifelong health challenges, necessitating ongoing medical care, lifestyle adjustments, and regular monitoring. The impact on quality of life is significant, affecting physical abilities, cognitive function, and overall well-being.

6. Research Gaps and Clinical Trials

The RD population also faces challenges related to research and clinical trials. The rarity of these diseases makes it difficult to conduct large-scale clinical trials, limiting the development of new treatments and therapies. Recruitment for trials is often slow due to the small patient populations and the geographical spread of patients. The lack of standardized endpoints in clinical trials further complicates the development of new treatments. Additionally, patient registries and data-sharing platforms are underdeveloped, making it challenging to collect comprehensive data on rare diseases, track patient outcomes, and compare the effectiveness of different treatments. The absence of adequate research funding and the reluctance of pharmaceutical companies to invest in rare disease drug development exacerbate these issues.

7. Patient Advocacy and Awareness

Effective advocacy for the RD population is critical but faces significant challenges. Many patients and their families feel neglected and excluded from decision-making processes regarding healthcare policy, treatment options, and

Rare Diseases as a Global Public Health Priority: Challenges and Opportunities

research priorities. The lack of awareness and understanding of rare diseases among the general public and even healthcare professionals leads to underfunding and inadequate support services. Advocacy groups work tirelessly to raise awareness, support research, and influence healthcare policies, but they often lack the resources and visibility needed to effect change. The RD community is increasingly using social media and online platforms to build networks and share information, but the impact of these efforts is still limited compared to more mainstream public health issues.

8. International Collaboration and Policy Gaps

Addressing the challenges faced by the RD population requires international collaboration and policy changes. Despite the efforts of organizations like the International Rare Diseases Research Consortium (IRDiRC), there remains a lack of coordinated global action. Different countries have varied approaches to rare disease management, resulting in discrepancies in care and access to treatments. Policies are often fragmented, and there is a need for global guidelines and frameworks that can standardize care and promote equitable access to treatments worldwide. The establishment of international networks for data sharing, research collaboration, and patient support is crucial to advancing the understanding of rare diseases and improving patient outcomes on a global scale.

6. RDs: A priority for global public health

Rare diseases are increasingly being recognized as a global public health priority due to their substantial impact on individuals, families, and healthcare systems worldwide. While each rare disease affects a small percentage of the population, their cumulative prevalence is significant, with over 7,000 identified rare diseases impacting approximately 5-8% of the global population. These conditions are defined by their low prevalence—typically affecting fewer than 1 in 2,000 individuals and often present with complex, non-specific symptoms that challenge accurate diagnosis and effective treatment. The rarity of these diseases not only makes them difficult to diagnose but also limits the development of therapeutic interventions due to the limited market size for potential treatments. Consequently, rare disease patients frequently experience long diagnostic delays, often spanning years, during which they may face numerous misdiagnoses and unnecessary medical procedures.

The global impact of rare diseases extends beyond individual health challenges, affecting societal and economic well-being. In many low- and middle-income countries, the healthcare infrastructure is inadequate to support the complex needs of rare disease patients, who may lack access to specialized care, genetic testing, and comprehensive treatment plans. This creates a significant disparity in healthcare access, where patients in developed countries benefit from multidisciplinary care and genetic counseling, while those in developing regions may struggle to obtain even a basic diagnosis. The economic burden of rare diseases is also considerable, with high out-of-pocket expenses for medications, therapies, and care that are not covered by insurance or reimbursement systems. In the United States, for example, the average annual cost of treatment for a rare disease patient can be as high as \$150,000, creating significant financial hardship for many families.

Raising awareness and improving education about rare diseases are critical to overcoming these challenges. Public understanding of rare diseases is often limited, leading to social stigma and misunderstandings about the conditions. Awareness campaigns, advocacy groups, and patient networks play a vital role in educating both the public and healthcare professionals about these diseases, helping to reduce diagnostic delays and ensure timely access to care. The use of social media and online platforms has been instrumental in connecting patients, sharing information, and advocating for policy changes. However, despite these efforts, many rare disease patients still face significant challenges in obtaining a correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment, particularly in regions with limited healthcare resources.

International collaboration is essential in the fight against rare diseases. Organizations like the International Rare Diseases Research Consortium (IRDiRC) have been pivotal in fostering global cooperation to advance research, improve diagnostics, and develop treatments. However, there remains a need for more coordinated efforts to standardize care and promote equitable access to treatments worldwide. The development of global registries and standardized diagnostic criteria can facilitate better understanding of rare diseases, track patient outcomes, and enable cross-border clinical trials. By pooling resources and sharing data, the global community can accelerate the discovery of effective therapies and ensure that all patients, regardless of where they live, have access to the care they need.

The role of digital health technologies in managing rare diseases is growing, providing new opportunities to improve diagnosis, monitoring, and treatment. Telemedicine, electronic health records (EHRs), and artificial intelligence (AI)

are increasingly being used to facilitate remote consultations, track disease progression, and analyze patient data for personalized treatment plans. Digital health platforms also enable the creation of rare disease registries, which can help collect data on disease prevalence, treatment outcomes, and patient experiences. By integrating digital technologies into healthcare systems, there is potential to improve access to care for rare disease patients, particularly in remote or underserved areas.

In conclusion, recognizing rare diseases as a global public health priority requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the unique challenges faced by this population. It involves improving diagnostic accuracy, expanding access to specialized care, fostering international cooperation, and leveraging digital technologies to enhance patient management. Governments, healthcare providers, pharmaceutical companies, and patient advocacy groups must work together to develop comprehensive strategies that not only address the needs of rare disease patients but also ensure that progress made in research and treatment is accessible to everyone affected by these often neglected conditions. By prioritizing rare diseases in the global health agenda, it is possible to make significant strides in reducing the burden on individuals and improving their quality of life.

7. Conclusion and Future work

Rare diseases represent a significant and growing challenge to global public health, affecting millions of individuals worldwide with profound impacts on their lives and well-being. These diseases are often overlooked due to their low prevalence, resulting in delayed diagnoses, limited access to treatments, and significant disparities in healthcare delivery. The global burden of rare diseases requires a coordinated response that involves governments, healthcare providers, researchers, and patient advocacy groups. By recognizing rare diseases as a public health priority, it is possible to address the unmet needs of affected populations and make substantial progress in reducing their impact on individuals and society as a whole.

The challenges faced by the rare disease community are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. From the complexities of diagnosis, which often takes years due to the rarity and non-specific nature of symptoms, to the lack of available treatments and financial barriers to access, rare disease patients face significant obstacles in managing their conditions. The social and economic impact extends beyond the individual, affecting families and communities and placing a burden on healthcare systems that are not always equipped to handle these complex cases. However, there are also significant opportunities to address these challenges. Advances in genetic research, telemedicine, and digital health technologies offer new avenues for diagnosis, monitoring, and personalized treatment strategies. The establishment of international registries, collaborative research efforts, and patient networks can accelerate the development of new therapies and improve access to existing treatments.

Looking ahead, future work must focus on several key areas to improve outcomes for rare disease patients. First, there is a need for enhanced diagnostic capabilities. Developing standardized diagnostic criteria and increasing awareness among healthcare professionals can shorten diagnostic delays and ensure that patients receive appropriate care sooner. Second, expanding access to treatments is crucial. Governments, pharmaceutical companies, and non-profits must work together to develop affordable and accessible therapies, particularly for conditions with high unmet needs. This includes finding solutions to the high costs of orphan drugs, such as price negotiations, subsidies, and support programs for patients who cannot afford treatment. Third, fostering international collaboration is essential to bridge gaps in research, policy, and healthcare access across countries. This involves creating global networks for data sharing, promoting the development of rare disease registries, and supporting cross-border clinical trials.

Acknowledgement: Nil

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare

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Rare Diseases as a Global Public Health Priority: Challenges and Opportunities

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