

Crisis Management in Primary Healthcare: The Essential Role of Family and General Physicians in Providing Immediate Care and Support

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ABSTRACT

Crisis management in primary health care is critical to ensuring the resilience of health care systems, especially in the face of unexpected public health emergencies. As the cornerstone of primary care, family physicians and general practitioners play a key role in providing immediate care and support during such crises. This review highlights the critical role played by family physicians in health crisis management. Family physicians are uniquely positioned to provide preventive, curative, and promotive care, address psychosocial support, and facilitate effective communication within the community and health care systems during crises. This article examines the roles, responsibilities, and challenges faced by family physicians in times of crisis and emphasizes the need for strategies to enhance their effectiveness, such as ongoing training, leveraging telemedicine, enhancing collaboration with hospitals and government agencies, and improving communication with the public.

KEYWORDS: Crisis management, primary health care, physicians.

Introduction

The family physician is the cornerstone of the primary health care system, playing a vital role in providing health care to individuals and families in the community, and is the first point of contact for individuals seeking primary medical care and health guidance [1].

Healthcare systems have recently witnessed many crises that have undermined their ability to provide healthcare services efficiently, the latest of which was the Covid-19 pandemic [2]. Health crisis management is defined as the control and management of emergency events that occur suddenly, some of which are predicted,

with the identification of internal and external variables, and then the use of available resources within health institutions to reduce the losses and damage that may be inflicted on the health care system [3,4].

Therefore, health care systems seek to recover and be prepared to manage crises by preparing for them and preparing a highly experienced team that can respond to these crises and solve them with the least possible losses [5]. The practice of family physician is characterized by comprehensiveness and diversity, as the general practitioner deals with a variety of health problems and medical needs of patients, starting from the diagnosis and treatment of common and chronic diseases, to prevent disease and referring patients to appropriate medical specialties [6]. This requires cooperation to be able to manage crises arising from the spread of diseases and pandemics.

The tasks of the family physician are not limited to interacting with patients only, but rather he studies the surrounding community and deals with the social and environmental determinants of diseases in each area surrounding the population associated with it, to avoid pathogens before they occur and reduce them in the community [7,8]. In addition, the family physician is committed to providing comprehensive and sustainable care for patients, including disease prevention, early diagnosis and management of chronic diseases, in addition to providing health advice and health education for patients and family members [9].

Accordingly, this review seeks to highlight the role of family physicians in managing health care crises, as well as in providing health care services and immediate support, which enhances the ability of health systems to face crises.

Family Medicine: A Broad Approach to Patient Care

Family medicine, also known as family practice, is a medical specialty that focuses on providing comprehensive, ongoing care to patients of all ages, from infants to the elderly. Family doctors, sometimes referred to as primary care doctors, are responsible for managing a wide range of health problems, including acute and chronic conditions, as well as providing preventive medical care and public health education [10].

The role of family physicians in managing health crises

The role of family physicians is to manage health crises by providing comprehensive and continuous primary care to patients, which helps in early detection and prevention of diseases [11]. They also contribute to directing patients towards specialized care when needed, in addition to providing psychosocial support to affected families to ensure their health and psychological stability during crises [10,11].

According to the role of family physicians, care can be classified into:

- Preventive health services:

The family physician provides preventive health care on an ongoing basis as part of the tasks of taking measures to prevent diseases before they occur. Preventive health services are a proactive approach aimed at managing health conditions and

preventing health risks that lead to crises. This includes conducting periodic examinations that contribute to early detection of health problems, which contributes to developing treatment plans, performing periodic vaccinations that protect against infectious diseases, and educational procedures provided by family physicians to patients, the elderly, and those with chronic diseases about the health system and the importance of exercising and adhering to daily health practices [12].

- Curative health care

The family physician provides curative health care services that treat diseases and eliminate their causes immediately after diagnosing the therapeutic condition. The therapeutic services provided by the family physician include diagnosing diseases and developing the optimal treatment plan, prescribing medical medications and determining the need for surgical interventions, and providing therapeutic services for emergency cases that require immediate medical intervention [13].

- Promoting health care

Promotive health care involves activities that enhance overall well-being and empower people to take greater control of their health. It goes beyond disease prevention by promoting environments and behaviors that are conducive to health. It includes community health initiatives that promote physical activity, healthy eating, and mental well-being; policies and regulations that create healthier environments, such as smoking bans and pollution control; and workplace health programs that encourage a healthy work-life balance and reduce stress [14,15].

Public Health Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication with Family Physicians

Public health crises have the potential to pose significant challenges to individuals, families, communities, regions, and populations. Regardless of the type of event that causes the crisis whether it is a new infectious disease outbreak or a climate-related disaster, there is a significant opportunity for difficulty, especially when considering risk communication during a public health crisis. Risk communication is an area of research and practice that informs many public health and health promotion campaigns [2]. The National Research Council (NRC) has defined successful risk communication as “an interactive process of information exchange among individuals, groups, and institutions [that] raises the level of understanding of relevant issues or actions to those concerned and convinces them that they are adequately informed within the limits of available knowledge” [16].

Most public health crises or emergency risk events are typically accompanied by confusion, related to communication and/or receipt of information about the event, as well as the emergent nature of crisis information in real time. When considering public health crisis and emergency risk communications to and from family physicians, although materials may come from different sources and perspectives, it is important to avoid any elements of inconsistency that could lead to confusion and loss of trust [17]. Also, the need to emphasize open communication between government, primary care practitioners and the public is an important element of a successful risk communication plan [18].

Family Physicians and Dealing with Public Health Crises: Lessons Learned

Family physicians are prepared to deal with serious public health emergencies, and family physicians have witnessed many such events such as SARS, swine flu, and most recently COVID-19 [19]. Sharing “lessons learned” including communication strategies between family physicians and other levels of health care/different organizations in different regions during crises such as an infectious disease outbreak will help prepare for the next pandemic, as it is inevitable that such public health crises will continue to occur [20].

Challenges faced by family physicians in crisis management

As family physicians are the first line of defense in healthcare, they face many challenges when managing and confronting crises, the most prominent of which are [21]:

- Lack of medical resources: Since crises are sudden, the ability of health systems to provide medical equipment, devices and medicines is limited in places occupied by family physicians.
- Tremendous psychological pressure: This is due to the nature of family physicians' tasks in providing healthcare during crises, which require working long hours in unstable conditions, which affects their ability to provide optimal care to patients.
- Communication: Family physicians face difficulty in providing and communicating accurate information to different levels of healthcare and to the community in emergency and crisis situations, which requires benefiting from previous experiences and establishing an effective communication system.

Strategies to enhance the effectiveness of family physicians in crisis management

Enhancing the effectiveness of family physicians in managing health crises requires adopting several comprehensive plans and strategies that will contribute to improving physicians' response to crises and providing effective health care in light of crises that health systems are exposed to. Family physicians and health care providers must receive continuous training that includes simulating expected health crises, and benefiting from the experiences of health systems in different countries and previous experiences of crises, which helps them deal with emergency cases and make effective decisions to manage the crisis [22]. In addition, modern technology and artificial intelligence must be employed in telemedicine, as doctors can provide remote consultations to patients, which reduces pressure on clinics and hospitals, facilitates communication with patients, and ensures the provision of health care services in a wider geographical area [23,24].

Cooperation with hospitals and government agencies is also important to ensure proper coordination between the various levels of health care and direct patients to the most appropriate place to receive treatment [25]. In addition, each family physician must develop a plan in advance that includes the procedures that must be taken in crises and ensure that family physicians receive psychological support due to the fatigue and stress they are exposed to during crises [26]. In addition to effective communication with the community, which would provide correct

information and thus build trust between the community and doctors and reduce the spread of fear and anxiety among patients and the community. These strategies enable family doctors to enhance their ability to manage crises efficiently and provide sustainable and effective health care [27].

Conclusion:

Primary care physicians and family physicians play a pivotal role in crisis management. Family physicians are integral to health crisis management due to their ability to provide comprehensive care, including disease prevention, early diagnosis, and psychosocial support. The role of family physicians during crises is particularly important, as they serve as the first line of defense in primary health care systems. To improve their effectiveness in crisis management, health care systems must invest in ongoing training, leverage technology such as telemedicine, and ensure strong coordination between family physicians, hospitals, and government agencies. Furthermore, creating a clear communication plan that reduces confusion and builds trust between health care providers and the public is essential for successful health crisis management. By learning from past experiences and continually improving crisis response strategies, family physicians can make a significant contribution to reducing the impact of future health emergencies and enhancing the resilience of primary health care systems worldwide.

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