

DOES THE NIGERIAN HEALTH SECTOR NEED FAMILY MEDICINE?

Dienye P.O,¹ Gbeneol P.K,¹ Atata C.T,¹ Oguzor U.C, Yoko I.¹

1. Department of Family Medicine, Rivers State University Teaching Hospital, Port Harcourt.

Corresponding Author

Name: Oguzor U.C

Email: nunus_oguzor@gmail.com

Department of Family Medicine, Rivers State University Teaching Hospital, Port Harcourt.

Abstract

Family medicine plays a vital role in enhancing healthcare delivery, yet its importance remains underrecognized in Nigeria. This article evaluates the relevance of family medicine in Nigerian health care industry where the healthcare system faces significant challenges, including limited access to care, an overburdened tertiary system, and a shortage of healthcare professionals. This article assesses the value of family medicine in the Nigerian healthcare sector, which is beset by a number of problems such as a lack of healthcare experts, a tertiary system that is overworked, and restricted access to care. Family medicine, with its focus on holistic, patient-centered, and continuous care, has the potential to address these gaps, particularly at the primary care level.

Family physicians provide comprehensive care that addresses not only physical health but also the psychological and social factors affecting patients. They are crucial in managing common conditions and the rising burden of non-communicable diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and respiratory illnesses. Additionally, family physicians are integral to maternal and child health, infectious disease control, and mental health services, which are critical public health areas in Nigeria.

However, family medicine in Nigeria faces significant challenges, including a shortage of trained family physicians, limited government support, and poor integration into the healthcare system. The preference for specialist care, combined with underinvestment in primary care, undermines the role of family medicine in health system strengthening.

To address these challenges, policy reforms are necessary to prioritize the training of family physicians, improve funding for primary care services, and raise public awareness about the importance of family medicine. By enhancing the role of family medicine, Nigeria can improve access to care, reduce pressure on tertiary care facilities, and create a more equitable healthcare system.

In conclusion, Family medicine is essential for ensuring sustainable and effective healthcare delivery in Nigeria.

Keywords: Family medicine, Primary healthcare, Nigeria healthcare system, non-communicable diseases, Healthcare access.

Introduction

Family practice is a medical specialty focused on the provision of continuing, comprehensive and coordinated health care for the individual, irrespective of age, sex, disease or stage of illness in a holistic manner within the context of his family and environment.¹ It is a cornerstone of healthcare systems worldwide and plays a pivotal role in the early detection, prevention, and management of a wide range of health conditions. In Nigeria, a country with a diverse population and varying healthcare needs, the importance of family practice cannot be overstated. Family physicians address a wide range of health issues from acute illnesses to chronic disease management, and act as the first point of contact within the healthcare system. They are essential in improving health outcomes, reducing healthcare costs, and increasing accessibility to healthcare services, especially in rural and underserved areas where healthcare resources are often limited.^{2,3} This paper is aimed at examining the necessity of family practice in Nigeria's healthcare delivery system considering the country's healthcare challenges and the potential benefits of a robust family practice specialty.

Healthcare Challenges in Nigeria.

Overview of the Nigerian Health system.

In Nigeria, the Federal, State, and Local levels of government are all responsible for delivering health services and initiatives. The Federal Government is primarily in charge of building health management information systems, coordinating the state-level implementation of the National Health Policy, and offering

planning, technical help, and policy direction. Disease surveillance, medication regulation, vaccination administration, and health professional training fall under the purview of the federal government. Along with running certain medical facilities, the federal government is also in charge of managing teaching, mental, and orthopedic hospitals. In Nigeria, health facilities are categorized according to the services they provide or how they are run. Government and commercial hospitals are under the management category. The 2014 National Health Act classifications of health services are Primary health care, Secondary health care, and Tertiary health care.⁴

The State Ministries of Health, State Hospital Management Boards, and Local Government Areas (LGAs) share management of public health facilities and programs. In Nigeria, private and faith-based healthcare facilities are crucial to the delivery of healthcare services. Nigeria is implementing the faith-based health response on two levels. The first level is the direct delivery of medical and health services at health institutions. According to estimates, the private sector and FBO provide up to 70% of all health services in Nigeria's remote and difficult-to-reach communities.⁴

Even though the MOH is Nigeria's top health care provider, private and faith-based healthcare facilities—whose networks reach even the most remote communities—play a significant role in expanding access to health care services. Additionally, they contribute significantly to Nigeria's overall health care delivery. Varied denominations in Nigeria have varied systems for managing and

governing their faith-based healthcare facilities. For Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, the Bishop's office is primarily responsible for the management board and governing council of a healthcare facility, with a direct line of communication to the Church's National Secretariat. The Islamic Medical Association of Nigeria (IMAN), in order to better serve mankind, the goal was to unite all Muslim health care providers in Nigeria. The establishment, ownership, and management of Islamic faith-based healthcare facilities in Nigeria differ differently from those of Christian faiths. Although privately held, the facilities are run in accordance with Islamic religious precepts. They are categorized as private healthcare institutions for this reason.⁴

Nigeria faces numerous healthcare challenges, including inadequate healthcare infrastructure, a high burden of infectious diseases, and a growing prevalence of non-communicable diseases. The healthcare infrastructure in Nigeria is significantly underdeveloped, with many facilities lacking essential equipment and resources, which hinders the delivery of quality healthcare services.^{5,6} The distribution of healthcare facilities is uneven, with rural areas being particularly underserved, leading to disparities in healthcare access and outcomes.⁷ The healthcare sector is underfunded, with a significant gap between the budget allocated and the actual needs. Corruption and inefficiency in the management of available resources further exacerbate the funding challenges. There is a critical shortage of doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals, particularly in rural areas. Many qualified healthcare workers migrate to other countries seeking better opportunities, leaving the local system understaffed.⁸

Many Nigerians lack access to essential medicines and vaccines due to cost, supply chain issues, and geographic barriers. Cultural beliefs and misinformation can lead to vaccine hesitancy, impacting immunization coverage.⁹ A small percentage of the population has health insurance, leading to high out-of-pocket expenses for healthcare services. The dominance of the informal sector in the economy makes it challenging to implement and expand health insurance coverage.¹⁰

Limited access to clean water and proper sanitation facilities contributes to the spread of waterborne diseases. Inadequate hygiene practices in many communities exacerbate health risks. Reliable health data is often lacking, making it difficult to plan, implement, and evaluate health interventions effectively. Under reporting of health issues and outcomes hinders accurate assessment and response.¹⁰ While there are numerous health policies, the implementation is often inconsistent and ineffective. Weak governance structures and accountability mechanisms undermine efforts to improve the healthcare system.¹¹

Traditional beliefs and practices can sometimes conflict with modern medical practices, affecting health-seeking behaviors. Low levels of health literacy and awareness impact the population's ability to make informed health decisions.¹⁰ Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes improving healthcare infrastructure, enhancing disease prevention and control programs, and increasing public health awareness and

education.¹¹

The Role of Family Practice

Family practice serves as the first point of contact in the healthcare system, offering continuous and comprehensive care. Family physicians are trained to provide preventive care, diagnose and treat a wide range of conditions, and coordinate care with specialists when necessary. As the cornerstone of primary healthcare, family practice plays a crucial role in promoting health, preventing disease, and managing chronic conditions.¹² Family physicians are adept at managing common illnesses and complex medical issues, ensuring that patients receive holistic and personalized care.¹³ They emphasize health promotion and disease prevention through regular screenings, immunizations, and lifestyle counseling, which are essential for early detection and management of health problems.¹⁴ Furthermore, family physicians serve as patient advocates, helping to navigate the healthcare system and ensuring that patients receive appropriate referrals and follow-up care from specialists.¹⁵ This integrative approach not only improves patient outcomes but also enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of the healthcare system.¹⁶

This model is particularly beneficial in Nigeria for several reasons: **Accessibility and Continuity of Care:** Accessibility and continuity of care are fundamental aspects of family practice. Family physicians provide ongoing care, building long-term relationships with patients. This continuity is crucial for managing chronic diseases and maintaining overall health, especially in rural areas where access to healthcare is limited. The continuous care provided by Family physicians allows for better monitoring of patients' health over time, enabling early detection and management of chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and asthma.¹⁴ In rural areas, where healthcare resources are often scarce, the role of Family physicians becomes even more critical. They serve as the primary point of contact for medical care and are skilled to offer several clinical services hence, reducing the need for patients to travel long distances to access specialized services.¹⁷ Additionally, Family physicians' knowledge of their patients' medical histories, social circumstances, and family dynamics enhances their ability to provide personalized care and make informed clinical decisions.¹⁸ This holistic approach not only improves health outcomes but also fosters trust and satisfaction among patients thus improving the Doctor-patient relationship.¹⁹

Preventive Care: Preventive care is a cornerstone of family practice, emphasizing interventions aimed at reducing the burden of diseases. Family physicians prioritize preventive measures such as vaccination programs, health education, and regular check-ups to mitigate the spread of infectious diseases and prevent the development of non-communicable diseases.²⁰ Vaccination programs, for instance, are crucial in preventing outbreaks of diseases like measles and polio, contributing to public health improvements globally. These programs have been shown to reduce morbidity and mortality rates, and in some cases, have led to the eradication of certain diseases, as seen with smallpox.²¹ Health education is one of the major clinical tools provided by Family physicians which empowers patients to adopt healthy behaviors and

lifestyles, reducing risk factors associated with chronic diseases such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. This education is offered during every patient encounter and it includes counseling on appropriate diet, physical activity, smoking cessation, and alcohol moderation, which are essential for managing and preventing chronic conditions.²² Regular check-ups allow for early detection of health issues, enabling timely interventions that can significantly improve outcomes and reduce healthcare costs. Early diagnosis and management of conditions like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes can lead to better prognoses and lower the need for more intensive and expensive treatments later on.²³

Cost-Effectiveness: Investing in family practice can lead to significant cost savings for the healthcare system. Family physicians play a crucial role in managing conditions early and preventing complications, thereby reducing the need for expensive specialist care and hospitalizations.²⁴ In addition to improving patient outcomes, this proactive strategy reduces overall healthcare costs by addressing health issues early on, before they worsen and become more expensive conditions.²⁴ Studies have shown that effective primary care, including family practice, is associated with lower healthcare expenditures and better health outcomes across various populations. Focusing on health promotion, chronic disease management, and preventive care, Family physicians efficiently utilize healthcare resources, which benefits patients and healthcare systems alike.²⁵

Comprehensive Care: Family physicians are uniquely trained to provide comprehensive care across the lifespan, from infancy through old age. This inclusive approach ensures that all family members receive appropriate and personalized healthcare, addressing the diverse health needs of the entire community.²⁶ By managing a wide range of acute and chronic conditions in patients of all ages, family physicians foster continuity of care and promote family-centered health management.²⁶ Their expertise in Generational medicine equips them to attend to pediatric and adolescent developmental milestones, manage complex health issues in the adult population and provide care that is specifically catered to the needs of the elderly population.²⁷

Coordination of Care: Family physicians coordinate care with other specialists and healthcare providers, ensuring that patients receive comprehensive and appropriate care. They integrate care across different levels of the healthcare system, from primary to tertiary care.

Community Health: Family physicians participate in community health initiatives, such as vaccination drives and health fairs. They engage in health promotion activities within the community, raising awareness about various health issues.

Health System Strengthening: Family physicians contribute to health policy development and advocacy, promoting policies that support primary care and public health.

Training of Healthcare personnel: They play a role in training and mentoring medical students, residents, and other healthcare professionals in primary care practices.

Accessibility and Equity: Family physicians often work in rural and

underserved areas, improving access to essential health services for these populations. They provide cost-effective care, reducing the financial burden on patients and the healthcare system.

This holistic care model not only enhances patient satisfaction but also improves health outcomes by fostering long-term relationships and understanding of familial and community contexts.²⁷

Case Studies and Evidence

Family practice, or family medicine, has demonstrated its importance globally through various cases and evidence. The specialty is recognized for its ability to improve health outcomes, enhance healthcare efficiency, and provide comprehensive care across all age groups. Here are some notable examples and evidence highlighting the significance of family practice around the world. Family practice, for instance, is the cornerstone of the Canadian healthcare system and is responsible for improved health outcomes and high patient satisfaction. Studies have shown that patients who have regular access to a family physician are more likely to receive preventive care, have better management of chronic conditions, and experience fewer hospitalizations.²⁸ Research from the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) shows that states with higher ratios of family physicians have lower overall healthcare costs and better health outcomes. Family practice helps in reducing unnecessary hospital admissions and emergency room visits²⁹ Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Family physicians play a critical role in managing chronic diseases and reducing healthcare costs. The National Health Service (NHS) relies heavily on general practitioners (GPs) to deliver primary care services, which has been associated with improved health outcomes and cost-effectiveness in the management of long-term conditions.³⁰ Family practitioners in Sweden are integral to managing chronic conditions and providing continuous care, which has resulted in improved patient outcomes and reduced strain on secondary care facilities.³¹ The Dutch healthcare system, which heavily relies on Family practitioners as gatekeepers to specialist care, has been praised for its efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Patients receive comprehensive care in a cost-controlled manner. The emphasis on Family practice has led to successful public health campaigns and preventive care initiatives, improving overall public health and reducing the incidence of preventable diseases in New Zealand³² In Australia, Family physicians play a key role in preventive care, including immunizations, cancer screenings, and health education. This has contributed to Australia's high vaccination rates and early detection of diseases.³ The German healthcare system emphasizes the role of family practitioners in coordinating care across different levels of the health system. This has led to seamless patient experiences and better health outcomes.³⁴ The Spanish primary care system, centered around Family practitioners, has been effective in managing chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes. This approach has led to better control of these conditions and reduced complications.³⁵

The Family Health Strategy (Estratégia Saúde da Família) in Brazil has expanded access to primary care services, especially in underserved areas. This program has significantly improved health outcomes and reduced disparities in healthcare access³⁶ Family

practitioners in Japan are vital in managing patient care across various healthcare settings, ensuring integrated and holistic care. This approach has contributed to Japan's high life expectancy and low infant mortality rates.³⁷ Family physicians in South Africa play a crucial role in providing primary care services in rural and underserved communities, helping to bridge the gap in healthcare access and equity.³⁸

By integrating family practice into healthcare systems, countries around the world have achieved significant improvements in health outcomes, cost efficiency, and patient satisfaction. The evidence underscores the critical role of family practitioners in providing accessible, comprehensive, and continuous care to populations.

In Nigeria, pilot programs integrating family practice into primary healthcare have shown promising results. For instance, a study in Kwara State demonstrated that introducing family physicians improved healthcare delivery and patient outcomes, particularly in managing chronic conditions like hypertension and diabetes. The study revealed significant improvements in the management of these chronic conditions, with patients receiving more consistent follow-up care and better health education, leading to improved control of blood pressure and blood sugar levels.³⁹ The Lagos State government has reported improved health outcomes due to the integration of family practice into its primary healthcare system, particularly in maternal and child health metrics. Programs like the Ogun State Primary Health Care Development Board have shown positive results in chronic disease management and community health promotion, largely attributed to the role of family physicians.⁴⁰⁻⁴²

Barriers to Implementing Family Practice in Nigeria

Despite its potential benefits, several barriers hinder the widespread adoption of family practice in Nigeria: Barriers to implementing family practice in Nigeria are numerous and multifaceted, hindering the development and effectiveness of this crucial component of primary healthcare. Implementing family practice in Nigeria faces several barriers, which can be broadly categorized into systemic, infrastructural, socio-cultural, and financial challenges.

Here is an in-depth look at these barriers:

Systemic Barriers

Policy and Governance: Inadequate government policies and lack of political will to prioritize primary healthcare and family practice can hinder implementation. There is often insufficient integration of family practice into national health strategies.⁴³

Regulatory Challenges: Inconsistent regulatory frameworks and standards for family practice can lead to variations in the quality of care and training programs across the country. Inequitable access to high-quality healthcare services, disparities in patient outcomes, and confusion between patients and healthcare professionals are just a few of the variations in care quality that will result from this. Additionally, this may result in insufficient practice preparation, limited chances for continuing education, and differences in curriculum and educational standards among training programs.⁴⁴

Infrastructural Barriers

Healthcare Facilities: Many primary healthcare centers in Nigeria are under-equipped and lack essential medical supplies and infrastructure needed to support comprehensive family practice. Limited access to sanitary facilities and clean water, as well as inadequate structures and facilities, inadequate power supply, absence of backup power supply, obsolete or non-functional medical equipment, a dearth of essential drugs and consumables, and a lack of diagnostic equipment (such X-rays and ultrasounds) are some of the challenges faced.⁴⁵

Technology and Equipment: Limited access to modern medical technology and diagnostic tools can impede the ability of family practitioners to provide high-quality care. This can impede diagnosis and treatment leading to delayed or inaccurate diagnoses, inadequate monitoring and management of chronic conditions and reduced ability to detect health issues early. It can also impact patient outcomes resulting in poor health outcomes and increased morbidity, increased risk of complications and mortality and decreased patient satisfaction and trust.

All these aforementioned reasons can also affect family practitioners' efficiency causing increased time spent on manual tasks, limited ability to manage complex cases, reduced productivity and burnout.⁴⁶

Human Resource Barriers

Shortage of Trained Professionals: There aren't enough Family Physicians to address the population's healthcare needs due to the dearth of family medicine-focused medical schools and training programs. Medical graduates often prefer specialized fields or opportunities abroad due to better career prospects and remuneration.⁴⁷

Training and Education: Insufficient training programs for family practice and lack of continuous professional development opportunities can affect the competency and skills of family practitioners. This insufficiency will lead to gaps in competency and skills resulting in inadequate knowledge of latest medical guidelines and research, Limited skills in procedures and diagnostic techniques.⁴⁸

Financial Barriers

Funding and Budget Allocation: Inadequate funding for the health sector, particularly for primary healthcare, limits the resources available for implementing family practice. Budget allocations are often skewed towards tertiary care and specialized services.⁴⁹

Cost of Care: High out-of-pocket expenses for patients can reduce the accessibility and affordability of family practice services, especially in low-income and rural areas. Factors contributing to high out-of-pocket expenses include: Lack of insurance coverage or inadequate coverage, high deductibles and copays, limited provider networks, unaffordable prescription medications and unexpected medical bills. These can limit access to necessary care, increase financial burden on patients, delay or forego care, exacerbating health issues and disproportionately affect vulnerable populations (low-income, rural, elderly).⁵⁰

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Public Awareness and Perception: Lack of awareness and understanding of the role and benefits of family practice among the general population can lead to underutilization of these services. Many people may still prefer specialist care over primary care services.⁵¹

Cultural Beliefs and Practices: Traditional beliefs and practices such as cultural and spiritual healing practices, Folk medicine and herbal remedies, Traditional birth practices, certain Dietary and lifestyle habits can sometimes conflict with modern medical practices, affecting the acceptance and implementation of family practice. These can influence health-seeking behaviors, affect adherence to modern medical treatments and ultimately impact health outcomes.⁵²

Logistical Barriers

Geographic Accessibility: In many rural and remote areas, healthcare facilities are sparse, making it difficult for residents to access family practice services. Poor transportation infrastructure further exacerbates this issue.

Supply Chain Issues: Inconsistent supply chains for medical supplies and pharmaceuticals can disrupt the delivery of family practice services, leading to shortages and stockouts. Inconsistent supply chains can be caused by logistics and transportation challenges, supply and demand imbalances, quality control issues, regulatory complexities, funding constraints, natural disasters and conflicts. The consequences will include: stockouts and shortages of essential medicines, disrupted patient care and treatment, increased risk of medication errors, decreased patient satisfaction, economic burden on healthcare systems and compromised health outcomes.⁵³

Healthcare System Integration

Fragmentation of Services: Lack of integration between different levels of care (primary, secondary, and tertiary) can lead to fragmented healthcare delivery. Effective implementation of family practice requires seamless coordination and referral systems.⁵⁴

Data and Information Systems: Weak health information systems hinder the ability to track and monitor the performance of family practice services, affecting decision-making and policy formulation. The challenges of a weak health information systems can lead to inaccurate or incomplete data, limited data analysis and interpretation, inadequate monitoring and evaluation, insufficient data sharing and integration, manual data collection and reporting, lack of standardization and interoperability and inadequate training and capacity building. The Consequences will result in poor decision-making and policy formulation, Inefficient resource allocation, inadequate service planning and delivery, reduced accountability and transparency, compromised patient care and outcomes, Inability to track progress and measure impact and limited research and quality improvement.⁵⁵

Recommendations

To address these barriers and enhance the role of family practice in Nigeria, the following recommendations are proposed:

Increase Training Programs: Expand family medicine residency

programs and provide incentives for medical students to specialize in family practice. One way to encourage more students to pursue this field of study could be to provide scholarships, grants, and competitive.

Improve Funding: Allocate more resources to primary healthcare and family practice, ensuring that facilities are adequately equipped and staffed. This includes increasing the budget for primary healthcare services, improving the supply of essential medicines and medical equipment, and ensuring that family physicians receive adequate compensation and support. Improved funding can enhance the overall quality of care provided and make primary healthcare services more accessible to the population.

Raise Awareness: Conduct public awareness campaigns to educate Nigerians about the benefits of family practice and the importance of preventive care. These campaigns can disseminate information through a variety of media channels, including radio, television, social media, and community engagement initiatives. Public education about the benefits of routine checkups, early disease detection, and how Family physicians may handle a variety of health issues can improve health outcomes.

Enhance Infrastructure: Invest in healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, to support the delivery of family practice services. This includes building new healthcare facilities, upgrading existing ones, and ensuring they are equipped with the necessary medical technology and supplies. Improving transportation infrastructure to facilitate easier access to healthcare services and providing adequate housing and other support for healthcare workers in rural areas are also crucial steps in enhancing healthcare delivery.

Policy and Governance: Strengthen political commitment and policy frameworks to prioritize primary healthcare and family practice. Implement regulatory standards for family practice training and service delivery.

Integration and Coordination: Enhance the integration of primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare services. Strengthen health information systems for better data collection and monitoring.

Conclusion

Family practice is essential in Nigeria, offering a comprehensive, accessible, and cost-effective approach to healthcare. By addressing the barriers to its implementation and investing in family practice, Nigeria can improve health outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and ensure that all citizens have access to quality healthcare. As the country continues to develop its healthcare system, family practice should be at the forefront of these efforts.

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