

Chapter 3

Health Information Communication in Rural Settings During Crises

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the critical role of health information communication in rural settings during pandemics. It looks into rural populations' unique challenges in accessing health information, information dissemination, and improving health outcomes. The chapter discusses the current health information communication in rural settings, the need for tailoring health information, the barriers, and the potential of technology and innovations in improving access to rural information. It also highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and policy considerations in effectively addressing health information disparities in rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of pandemics on a country's healthcare systems is profound, challenging the very core of governments' capacity to respond to public health emergencies. While pandemics such as COVID-19 have resonated globally, they have also spotlighted the unique challenges rural communities face in accessing timely and accurate health information. Effective health information communication is paramount during pandemics, as it serves as a lifeline for individuals seeking guidance and reassurance and plays a pivotal role in the overall containment and management of the crisis.

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Generally, access to health information is crucial in empowering individuals to make informed decisions on their health and well-being (Gale et al., 2020; Kelley et al., 2016). However, one of the persisting challenges is ensuring equitable access to health information, particularly in rural areas. Rural communities often face limited healthcare infrastructure, geographical isolation, and a lack of resources (MacLeod et al., 2020), which impede their access to timely and reliable health information (Gale et al., 2020; Kelley et al., 2016; McIlhenny et al., 2011), exacerbating the effect of the pandemic when it arises.

Technological advances have caused a growing recognition of their potential to bridge this gap and improve health information access in rural areas during a pandemic. In particular, digital and mobile health (mHealth) solutions have emerged as promising tools for delivering health information and services to underserved populations. These technologies leverage the widespread adoption of mobile devices and the increasing connectivity of rural areas to overcome traditional barriers to access (Oliver-Williams et al., 2017).

The book chapter explores the status of health information access and the technology's potential to address the challenges of health information access in rural areas. Examination of the role of technology in facilitating equitable access to health information during pandemics looks into the opportunities and implications technology offers for enhancing health outcomes in rural populations. Specifically, it discusses the practices, barriers, and implementation considerations associated with technology-driven solutions in rural healthcare settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Health Information Communication in Rural Communities

Community access to health information is pivotal for a healthier population as it helps them take responsibility for their health and make better-informed decisions about their health. The research shows that well-informed individuals are likely to be more responsible for their health, e.g., by doing regular health check-ups, complying with treatment and immunizations, and staying healthy for longer than their uninformed counterparts (Mwangakala et al., 2021). Moreover, better access to and use of health information helps individuals improve their knowledge, increase the use of health services, reduce healthcare costs, adopt healthier behaviors, and promote health (Chen et al., 2018).

Davenport (1997) defined information behavior as “how people approach and handle information,” which includes searching for it, modifying it, sharing it, hoarding it, and even ignoring it (p.83-84). He further described ‘information sharing’ as

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