

Sepsis Awareness Month: Addressing Health Disparities and Improving Outcomes



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Mahlet Zeru, MPH

Equity and Social Justice Manager

Since its designation in 2011, September has been recognized as Sepsis Awareness Month¹, a time when healthcare providers and institutions come together to increase awareness of sepsis - a leading cause of death in U.S. hospitals². Sepsis is commonly defined as a life-threatening organ dysfunction caused by a dysregulated host response to infection³. The implementation of facility based standardized protocols, monitoring policies and quality improvement in healthcare facilities has decreased the prevalence of sepsis^{4,5}, but minority populations continue to face disproportionately higher risk⁶.

Understanding Sepsis Disparities Among Minority Populations

Although healthcare improvements have led to a reduction in sepsis prevalence, minority patients remain at greater risk due to a combination of socioeconomic factors, healthcare access barriers, and systemic discrimination⁷. These factors contribute to higher infection rates, delayed treatment, and poorer outcomes for minority groups^{8,9}.

Higher Rates of Chronic Conditions

Chronic health conditions, such as diabetes¹⁰, hypertension¹¹, and kidney disease¹², are more prevalent among African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans compared to their White counterparts. These conditions heighten the risk of infections that may lead to sepsis. For instance, a 2002 study of sepsis cases in New Jersey hospitals found that black patients with sepsis were more likely to have underlying conditions like HIV, diabetes, obesity, burns, and chronic renal failure than white patients¹³. These comorbidities increase susceptibility to infections and contribute to worse sepsis outcomes.

Barriers to Healthcare Access

Access to quality healthcare plays a critical role in the early detection and treatment of infections that can lead to sepsis. However, minority populations often face significant barriers to care, including lack of insurance, fewer healthcare facilities in their communities, and lower quality of care^{13,14}. These factors contribute to delayed diagnoses and inadequate treatment, raising the risk of sepsis and its complications. Black patients are more likely to reside in areas with under-resourced hospitals¹⁵, fewer specialists, and lower nurse-to-patient ratios^{16,17}, all of which can impact the quality of care they receive.

Impact of Implicit Bias and Systemic Racism

Implicit bias and systemic racism within healthcare settings also contribute to disparities in sepsis care¹⁸. Research shows that black patients are less likely to be admitted to the ICU for severe sepsis or septic shock compared to white patients¹⁹. Delayed recognition and treatment of sepsis in minority populations—both adults²⁰ and children²¹—have been documented, leading to worse outcomes and lower survival rates. These disparities underscore the need for addressing biases that affect clinical decision-making and care delivery.

Addressing Sepsis Disparities: A Path Forward

Efforts to reduce sepsis disparities must focus on several key areas:

- **Improving Access to Healthcare:** Ensuring minority communities have better access to quality healthcare services, including preventive care and timely treatment.
- **Enhancing Quality of Care:** Strengthening the resources and care provided in hospitals that predominantly serve minority populations.
- **Addressing Implicit Bias:** Implementing training programs for healthcare providers to recognize and mitigate the effects of implicit bias in clinical settings.
- **Community Outreach:** Increasing awareness and education about sepsis in minority communities to promote earlier recognition of symptoms and encourage timely medical intervention.
- **Systemic Changes:** Tackling the broader social determinants of health, such as poverty and housing, which contribute to disparities in infection rates and sepsis outcomes.

Get Involved in Sepsis Awareness Month

Providers are encouraged to participate in Sepsis Awareness Month activities throughout September by taking advantage of continuing medical education (CME) opportunities focused on sepsis care and management.

- [Sepsis Alliance Institute](#)
- [Sepsis Core Elements: CDC Webinar Series](#)
- [American College of Physicians](#)

By staying informed and engaged providers can help reduce the burden of sepsis and close the gaps in care affecting minority populations. Healthcare providers can ensure that all patients; regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status can receive the timely, high-quality care they need to survive sepsis.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.sepsis.org/get-involved/sepsis-awareness-month/#:~:text=In%202011%2C%20Sepsis%20Alliance%20designated,death%20in%20U.S.%20hospitals%20%E2%80%93%20sepsis>. Accessed August 2024
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