



Corruption in the Health Sector: Causes and Eradication

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Although corruption in the health sector is a worldwide issue, there are notable differences in its manifestations and the motivations driving it in low- and middle-income countries compared to high-income countries. Within the healthcare sector, corruption can vary from minor performances, such as doctors and nurses accepting sweeteners (bribes) from patients or falsifying data, to larger-scale corruption at the level of hospital administrators or government officials who misuse community resources or divert resources meant for those in need for personal gain, ultimately harming public health. The negative impact of corruption on health outcomes is severe. Since corruption undermines the quality of healthcare services, it is crucial to establish strong regulatory oversight, transparency, and accountability. To achieve universal health coverage and uphold the fundamental right to health, corruption must be eliminated or minimized to ensure the effective delivery of healthcare services that positively influence population health. The aim of this review is to discuss the knowledge, causes, types of corruption and strategies for eradicating of corruption in the health sector. A total of 42 articles and documents on corruption in the health care system were selected for analysis.

Keywords: Corruption, Health Sector, Informal Payment, Nepotism, Transparency

Introduction

In 1946, the WHO (World Health Organization) defined health in a comprehensive way as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity [1]. The demand for healthcare is higher now than ever before in history, due to globalization, which has brought about development, overpopulation, technological advancements, oil consideration, warfare, genetic variation of food, social issues, migration, and an increase in illnesses, all of which are driving the need for healthcare [2].

In 2013, a campaign against corruption that was organized by Transparency International indicated that in 42 out of 109 nations surveyed, more than 50% of residents considered that the health sector in their country was corrupt or highly corrupt [2].

The World Health Organization stated in 2017 that at least forty million individuals globally lack access to basic health services, and forty percent of the global population has no social protection, which highlights the unequal distribution of resources that are essential for improving health outcomes [3]. Corruption in the health sector is another prevalent, pervasive problem that can severely impact access to healthcare, the quality of services, equity, efficiency, and overall effectiveness, all of which hinder progress toward achieving universal health coverage [4].



In 2015, studies highlighted that Gupta et al. collected data from 89 nations and identified a strong correlation between corruption and low birth weight, lower immunization rates, higher child and infant mortality, and a reduced likelihood of attended births [5].

Furthermore, corruption imposes a significant financial burden. Bribery alone is estimated to cost at least \$1 trillion annually worldwide, not accounting for the theft of public assets or the embezzlement of public funds [6].

The situation is even worse in developing nations, where corruption is more prevalent, which indicates that essential resources to improve health outcomes are not equitably distributed, and corruption remains a global issue that affects countries across the world [7].

Studies considered that in Afghanistan, bribing authorities is part of everyday life. Doctors were the fifth-largest and nurses the seventh-largest group involved in corruption and typically demanded incentives for their services [8].

In another investigation, which was conducted between August and October 2009 and polled 7600 Afghan civilians in 12 provincial capitals and 1600 villages of Afghanistan, claims that "it is nearly impossible to obtain a public service in Afghanistan without greasing a palm [9].

According to the United Nations survey, in Afghanistan women pay more than men in bribes in seventy-four percent of cases to speed up health services and in twenty percent of cases to achieve better health services [8].

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines corruption as a criminal and immoral act, representing the ultimate betrayal of public trust, which involves the misuse of public office and power for personal gain, while the World Bank describes corruption as "the abuse of public office for private gain [10].

Corruption has a detrimental impact on the equitable delivery of essential healthcare services, driving up healthcare costs for the poor and marginalized, leading to inefficient care, and contributing to poor health outcomes that result in high out-of-pocket expenses, a loss of trust in the healthcare system, and reduced use of available services [11].

According to National Academies Press of United States (2018), corruption in the health sector has been found to occur in a variety of contexts, including the building of medical facilities, the procurement of supplies and equipment, the distribution and use of pharmaceuticals, human resource, the fabrication of medical research, and the delivery of medical services [12]. Long-term inaccurate financial support of the government, a lack of regulatory supervision, and opaque governance all contribute to corruption and lower healthcare quality [13]. Public health spending is inefficient in poorer nations due to ineffective administration that encourages corruption, mismanagement of the meager resources allotted to healthcare, and a negative impact on population health [14].

Preventing corruption in the health sector is a challenging but essential goal for any nation striving for good health outcomes because it leads to the misallocation of limited resources and significantly undermines the quality of healthcare services [15]. To combat this, it is crucial to ensure adequate funding for the healthcare system, implement strong regulatory oversight, and promote transparency in all aspects of healthcare governance because these measures are necessary to reduce corruption, improve service delivery, and make healthcare more effective and equitable [16].



Materials and Methods

For this review, we conducted an electronic search using three databases PubMed, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar to identify relevant articles. We selected a total of 42 articles and documents addressing corruption in the healthcare system for analysis.

Corruption in health Sector

All nations are concerned about corruption in the health sector, but developing and transitional economies, where public resources are already limited, face a particularly serious challenge [17]. Injustice (corruption) discourages people from using and paying for health services, lowers the quality, equity, and efficacy of medical services, lowers the volume and raises the cost of services provided, and eventually has a detrimental effect on the general health of the population [18]. Corruption is also a major barrier to realizing the SDG (United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal), which aims to ensure healthy lives, promote well-being (justice) for all at all ages, and strong organizations as outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [19].

Types of Corruption in the Health Sector

In the healthcare system, the following main types of Injustice (corruption) undermine the quality of care and healthcare outcomes:

1. **Absenteeism:** Absenteeism among healthcare workers can significantly hinder access to medical services [20]. In low- and middle-income countries, absenteeism rates vary from 19% to 60%, with higher absenteeism among more skilled professionals like doctors and pharmacists compared to less specialized staff [21].
2. **Construction and Rehabilitation of Health Facilities:** Corruption can occur during the construction or renovation of healthcare facilities and may involve inflating project costs, poor-quality materials, or misappropriating funds meant for building or improving healthcare infrastructure [22].
3. **Procurement of drugs and medical equipment:** Corruption often affects the procurement process for medical equipment and drugs that may involve bribery to select certain suppliers, overpricing, or purchasing substandard or expired medications and equipment, leading to poor service delivery and compromised patient care [23].
4. **Distribution of Drugs and Supplies in Service Delivery:** Corruption in the distribution phase can involve diverting drugs and supplies meant for healthcare delivery, either for resale or for personal gain, which not only deprives patients of necessary treatments but also creates shortages and increases the cost of healthcare [24].
5. **Regulation of Quality in Products, Services, Facilities, and Professionals:** When bribes may be accepted to overlook substandard medical products, poorly trained healthcare professionals, or inadequate facilities, it is allowing unsafe practices to continue, which occur as a result of interfering with the regulatory processes that ensure quality standards in healthcare [25].
6. **Human resources management:** Corruption can also affect medical education, such as when admissions or promotions are granted in exchange for bribes or favoritism rather than merit, which compromises the quality of training for healthcare workers, resulting in less qualified professionals entering the workforce [26].
7. **Medical Research:** Corruption in medical research can involve manipulating data, misappropriating research funds, or falsifying findings, which undermines the credibility of scientific studies, wastes resources, and can delay the development of effective treatments or cures [27].



8. **provision of services by medical personnel:** Healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, and administrative staff, may engage in corrupt practices such as demanding bribes for services, neglecting their duties, or providing substandard care in exchange for personal gain, which not only compromises patient care but also erodes public trust in the healthcare system [28].

Impacts of Corruption on Health Sector Performance

According to a study of 2011 that collected data from 178 countries, it indicated that the deaths of around 140,000 children each year could be indirectly linked to injustice (corruption). In this study, they stated that child mortality was more strongly correlated with levels of national corruption than with factors like knowledge levels, access to pure water, or even vaccination coverage [29]. According to Transparency International (2011), injustice (corruption) is a multipart and multi-layered issue [30]. When those in power misappropriate funds or divert resources meant for public health, it has unfavorable outcomes on the following five key dimensions of healthcare organization act: access to health, quality of care, equity, efficiency of the health sector, and efficacy [10].

Causes of Corruption in the Health Sector

1. **Low salaries of healthcare workers:** Many health workers, including doctors, nurses, and administrative staff, are paid low wages, which drives some individuals to accept bribes or engage in corrupt practices as a means to supplement their income [28].
2. **Weak governance and oversight:** A lack of effective oversight mechanisms and weak governance structures allow corruption to flourish in both the public and private healthcare sectors, and poor regulatory frameworks with limited transparency make it difficult to hold officials accountable [31].
3. **Patronage and nepotism:** Political influence often leads to the appointment of individuals to key healthcare positions based on family ties or political loyalty rather than merit, which undermines professionalism and accountability in the sector [32].
4. **Political interference:** Political interference in healthcare decision-making and in anti-corruption investigations has prevented meaningful reforms [33]. Government leaders often prioritize personal or political interests over the efficient and transparent functioning of the health system [34].

Key Strategies to Eradicate Corruption in the Health Sector

It is the duty of a government to achieve the policy goals and ensure the public services (system performance), such as managing the tax collection, merging resources, and supporting suppliers in a manner that promotes the provision of effective, high-quality services [25]. The state also has the (standard-setting and regulatory) responsibility to ensure that medications are safe and effective, that practitioners are qualified, and that facilities are manned and furnished to provide quality treatment [34]. To combat corruption in the health sector, Transparency International emphasizes the need to promote transparency, accountability, and integrity at all levels of governance and within all sectors of society [33]. The following strategies are essential:

1. **Proper Funding of the Health Sector:** Adequate and well-managed funding is crucial to ensuring the health sector is capable of providing quality care to all individuals because corruption can divert funds away from essential services, so it is important that resources are allocated and spent transparently [35].



2. **Improving healthcare worker salaries:** Raising the salaries of healthcare workers and public sector employees would reduce the incentive to engage in corrupt practices, such as accepting bribes or misappropriating funds [36].
3. **Regulatory Oversight and Transparency:** Strong regulatory frameworks must be in place to oversee healthcare operations and prevent corrupt practices, which comprise ensuring that all transactions and decisions in the healthcare system are open to scrutiny and that resources are managed efficiently [36].
4. **Good Governance Practices:** Anti-corruption efforts in the health sector should focus on promoting good governance, which includes the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and public participation, because accountability to the public is crucial in building trust in healthcare institutions and public officials [34]. Public officials must be held responsible for their actions, and there should be mechanisms to assess whether they are meeting their commitments and the goals set by the government [37].
5. **Promoting merit-based appointments:** To combat patronage and nepotism, the government should implement a merit-based system for hiring and promoting healthcare professionals [38]. Transparent recruitment and promotion processes would reduce the influence of political or familial connections in the health sector [28].
6. **Anti-corruption laws and enforcement:** Strengthening and enforcing anti-corruption laws, including those related to the health sector, is crucial [37]. The government should empower anti-corruption agencies to independently investigate and prosecute healthcare corruption without political interference [39].
7. **Public Access to Information:** Transparency is key to preventing corruption, which can be achieved by making information about healthcare services and decisions publicly available [33]. Strategies for enhancing transparency include the use of electronic devices to provide services to citizens, open contracting, and e-procurement systems, which help ensure that healthcare resources are allocated fairly and efficiently, reducing opportunities for corrupt behavior [38].
8. **Integration of ethics and religious values:** In a country like Afghanistan, where religion and ethics play a central role in daily life, incorporating these values into anti-corruption strategies could be highly effective [37]. Religious leaders and local community leaders should be engaged in promoting ethical behavior and condemning corruption, particularly in healthcare settings [40].
9. **International cooperation and aid transparency:** International donors, including Organizations like the World Bank, USAID, and the European Union, can play a significant role in combating corruption by ensuring that funds are properly monitored and used for their intended purposes [41]. Donors should also demand greater accountability and transparency in the health sector when providing financial support [37].
10. **Establishing an anti-corruption commission with real independence:** Set up an anti-corruption commission, and for it to be truly effective, it must operate independently of political influence with the ability to investigate and prosecute corruption in the health sector without fear of reprisal [42].

By combining these strategies focusing on transparency, accountability, and good governance, corruption in the health sector can be significantly reduced, which will not only help achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC) but also contribute to improved population health outcomes, thus moving closer to the realization of the SDG health targets [19].

Conclusion

Corruption in the healthcare sector is a global challenge; developing and transitional economies, where public resources are already limited, face a particularly serious challenge with far-reaching consequences that directly undermine the efficiency, quality, and equity of health systems at the national and international level. Corruption in the health sector has been found to occur in different areas, such as the building of medical



facilities, the procurement and distribution of drugs and medical equipment, human resources, the fabrication of medical research, and the delivery of medical services, which exacerbates existing health disparities, leaving the poor and marginalized without access to necessary services that result in high out-of-pocket expenses, a loss of trust in the healthcare system, and reduced use of available services. However, the fight against corruption in healthcare of a country is not without solutions; it needs changes in framework (institutions), views, and behavior. In order to accomplish the health sector's objectives of better care quality and equity in access and results, corruption control is a crucial aspect of management. Promoting good management for improved health is a responsibility shared by the government, service providers, people, and resource consumers. Transparent governance, regulatory oversight, improved accountability, and better public access to healthcare information are key strategies to combat this pervasive issue.

Recommendations

Studies have shown that corruption in the health sector is a global problem, and developing countries are more affected by this situation than developed countries. Therefore, those responsible for countries like Afghanistan should pay attention to the following points to combat corruption:

1. Every nation needs to create and maintain a robust anti-corruption strategy led by highly qualified professionals, with existing strategies requiring thorough review every five years.
2. To boost public trust, anti-corruption agencies should launch free contact centers for consumers and proactively communicate their results.
3. To strengthen trust in anti-corruption efforts, authorities should set up free contact centers linking the public (consumers) with anti-corruption agencies and widely share their outcomes.
4. The Ministry of Higher Education should introduce a credit-bearing course titled Combating Corruption into the curricula of all relevant faculties, ensuring comprehensive measures are taken against corruption. This initiative could help developing countries like Afghanistan achieve lasting protection from this widespread issue.

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