Review Article

Home Visits and Home-Based Care: A Necessary, Impractical, or Humanitarian Primary Care Service?

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Citation: Verjee MA (2019) Home Visits and Home-Based Care: A Necessary, Impractical, or Humanitarian Primary Care Service? J Family Med Prim Care Open Acc: JFOA-122. DOI: 10.29011/JFOA-122/100022

Received Date: 31 December, 2018; Accepted Date: 21 January, 2019; Published Date: 28 January, 2019

Abstract

Looking after patients at home may be considered to be more a feature of the past, but delivering quality home-based care may contribute to beneficent and cost effective overall healthcare. While regarding an elderly population of over sixties as more vulnerable, the added workload for primary care physicians is a consideration when using resources, allowing time, providing benefits, and seeking positive outcomes. New models of care studied confirm a perceived need for an extra level of patient-centred care. Nurse practitioners play a greater part compared with physicians, the latter more likely to sustain pressure from overwork. Burnout and loss of professional recognition and service can lead to dissatisfaction.

Keywords: Community-Based; Domiciliary Care; Elderly; Home-Based; Home Visit; House Calls; Palliative Care; Primary Care.

Introduction

Studying elderly patient cohorts living in specific global populations recognizes domiciliary or home care. An extension of that area of work falls into primary care’s hands with community hospitals, and patients’ homes, receiving patients discharged from tertiary care, for convalescence, respite care, short stays, or fully discharged. Brown, et al. [1] suggested alternative forms of healthcare for the over sixties in one location, with the provision of multidisciplinary care in day hospitals. Managing patients with substance abuse withdrawal signs and associated symptoms needs specialized skills, as do some psychiatric patients with dementia or delirium. An underrated element is healthcare for patients who stay at home and need specific acute or progressive follow up, from wound dressings to palliative care when hospital services are not utilized. Providing home care in any capacity also has challenges. Theile, et al. [2] carried out a German population study and found home visits remained an integral part of medical care but were unconvinced of their benefit although such visits continued undisputed. Financial recognition for service was an issue. There was conflict between motivation and obligation for completing home visits. Caring for patients in nursing homes are thought to be distressing for both carers and patients. Theile, et al. [2] continued with a survey to reveal physician comments on nursing homes being places of “resignation, incapacitation, sadness, anguish, despair, gruesome.” Nursing home residents feel they “don’t have a place elsewhere, are rejected, are living in forced circumstances, have lost their personality, are unhappy.”

Home Care

The point of home care fades if we forget objectivity. One could argue that home visits are inefficient and use up too much of a practitioner’s clinical time. Conversely, one could see more patients presenting at a medical office or clinic in similar time. There is no precisely accurate idea of how much home visits cost, whereas hospital costs are regularly reported, and may raise consternation when the expenses are broken down. Hospital costs per day by country in 2015 ranged from US$ 424 in Spain to $5220 in the United States [3]. Home-based care or home visits cost a fraction in comparison (Figure 1).
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Spectrum of Care

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remuneration remains an issue. The United Kingdom’s National Health Service

has a patient panel reimbursement structure on a per annum basis. Canada has a fee for service structure, with differential

rates for out of hours visits. Yao, et al. [5] describes the role of Nurse Practitioners (NPs) for house calls in the United States. In

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Use of Nursing and Allied Health Support

The vocational and professional care that can be provided

by physicians to patients at home, impossible without specialist

nursing support and input from other carers including pharmacists,

social workers, volunteers, advocates, and family relatives, are

professionally fulfilling. Not all physicians seek such additional

tasks. Pereles [4], had a more optimistic slant after reviewing

sixty-five descriptive and non-analytical articles from a Medline

search between 1989 and 2000, stating that home visits would

need to increase with more community-based care. Remuneration

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Spectrum of Care

Post-operative patients, post-delivery mothers, chronically

debilitated, disabled, mentally ill, or those in need of palliative

care, have different issues. At home, they retain control of their

environment, see people they know, feel stabilized by familiar

objects and surroundings. More important, it is patient-centeredness

that enables families to be involved by a physician when a patient

returns home from hospital admission or falls ill at home. End of

life issues generate innate emotion within a family setting. Some

patients wish to die at home, from old age or terminal illness.

The latter’s timeline is less predictable, and home visits are both

supportive and completed as required rather than being regarded as

routine. Tanuseputro, et al. [6] assessed the impact of home visits

by palliative care physicians and family physicians, both showing

a corresponding reduction in the odds ratio of 47% and 59% of

hospital deaths.

Relish or Loathe

Anyone trained for home visits either relishes the opportunity

of meeting their patients with families or loathes it as a disruptive

burden. Deciding on a domiciliary visit is at the behest of the

physician of care. For the former, many have continued to gain

professional satisfaction. They may not give up their current

care habits, regardless of the semblance of time spent, and can

continue to take training family medicine residents with them to

home-based visits, where determinants of health are self-evident

as Pham, et al. discuss. [7]. For the latter, providing healthcare at

home is a chore, not an eye-opener. Dining, bedroom and bathroom

arrangements need consideration. Social, nursing, pharmaceutical,

occupational healthcare, mobility issues by using a walking frame,

or wheelchairs, or staircase chairlifts at home, elicit new hurdles.

Norman, et al. [8] completed an observational study of home-

based care from six practice sites. Best primary care practices were

derived to tend to seniors with multiple pathologies, to enable more

efficient and comprehensive care. McGregor et al. [9] studied the

difference between home-based integrated and usual primary care

and found that the former was superior for health outcomes.

Experiential Learning

The experience and learning on site are apparent for doctors

to sense at once, as well as generating compassion, serving to

set a level of care and expertise that stimulates their doctoring

aspirations. Office visits for minor ailments or procedures like

injections are not challenging, and many physicians can become

disheartened by the “same old, same old” repeaters. The constant

pressure imposed by full waiting rooms spark the flame of tedium

with anxiety. Many physicians may suffer unnecessary stress and

burnout from lack of professional satisfaction, overwork, ensued

in a medium to long-term period. Drybre, et al. [10] using a

screening tool, the Physician’s Well-Bing Index (PWBI), estimated

that 24.8% of physicians planned to leave their current post, with

26.8% intending to reduce their working hours.

Every patient consultation is intrinsic, if not critical to

a degree, regardless of where and when conducted. The hidden

curriculum is that home visits provide time-outs from the office,

availing physicians with respite too, with no interruptions, a visual

change, no extra walk-ins, and a chance to be away from phone

calls, and the ever-present demands to complete the EMR.

One cannot counter visits for repeat prescriptions with

holistic care, and continuity of care, for a dying person, to gain

income. Planning, time-management, trained professional

office staff, guidelines for practice, and effective doctor-patient

communication, all are essential.

The response when a patient or a family member expresses

gratitude after weeks or even months of home-based care is unique
and justifies the time spent in trying to achieve a satisfactory outcome. A simple compliment makes one feel valued, without expectation of reward or accolade. One should be able to say that all the rigorous medical school and postgraduate training was worthwhile, and that delivery of care and not financial gain is more important. Payments should not be an issue that clouds clinical judgment.

**Conclusion**

Home visits may be declining for a targeted elderly population and seen by many as being impractical for primary care. Discouraging this aspect of care may result in a loss of traditional clinical experience, unmet demographic needs, and increased or expedited referrals to emergency departments or for hospital admissions, with anticipated volume overload. Both secondary and tertiary facilities are costly and less personal services. While home visits cannot be regarded as essential, recalling McWhinney’s words [11] serves to remind physicians and nurse practitioners of their responsibility, and competencies, while retaining “compassion and empathy for those most in need”, in a lifelong commitment of humanitarian service.

**References**


