

Barriers and Enablers to Accessing Eye Care Services Among Residents of Aged Care Homes

Arun Prasad Dhungana¹

Ph.D scholar in Optometry
Assistant professor
Senior Optometrist
National Academy of Medical Science

Dr. Himadri Shekhar Dey²

Associate professor
Sushant University

Mr. Gyan Bahadur Basnet³, Mr. Ayush Wilson⁴

Abstract:

Vision impairment (VI) is disproportionately high among the elderly population in the communities. It is even higher among the elderly in residential care in India (Marmamula S et.al.,2021). Visual impairment is highly prevalent among older adults in aged care homes, yet many face significant barriers in accessing eye care services. This review synthesizes existing literature on the challenges and facilitators influencing eye care access for this vulnerable population. Key barriers include systemic gaps in service provision, mobility limitations, cognitive impairments, and insufficient staff training. Enablers such as mobile eye clinics, tele-ophthalmology, policy reforms, and staff education programs show promise in improving access. Addressing these factors is crucial for preventing avoidable vision loss and enhancing quality of life in aged care residents.

INTRODUCTION

Due to an increase in senescence, contributed by changes in lifestyle and rapid urbanisation, the numbers of elderly either living alone or with their spouses is on the rise. This has also led to an increase in the number of homes for the aged in India, which is currently estimated to be around 1000 homes housing over 100000 residents in them. This number is likely to increase in time (Tata trust report, 2018). Vision impairment (VI) is disproportionately high among the elderly population in the communities. It is even higher among the elderly in residential care in India (Marmamula S et.al.,2021). Age-related eye diseases—such as cataracts, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration (AMD), and diabetic retinopathy—are leading causes of vision impairment among aged care residents. Despite high prevalence rates, studies indicate that many do not receive timely eye care, leading to preventable vision loss and reduced quality of life. To address vision loss in the elderly, a comprehensive strategy is essential. This strategy includes identification of the elderly with vision loss, providing them with spectacles, and further referral of complex cases for medical/surgical intervention. The uptake of appropriate and timely eye care by people with vision loss has been a major cause of concern across all age groups (Kovai V et.al,2007). This review examines the barriers preventing aged care residents from accessing eye care services and explores potential enablers to improve service delivery.

METHODS

A systematic search was conducted in PubMed, Scopus, and CINAHL using keywords: "*aged care*," "*nursing home*," "*eye care access*," "*vision screening*," "*barriers*," and "*enablers*." Articles published between 2015–2024 were included. Studies focusing on older adults (65+ years) in residential aged care settings were prioritized.

BARRIERS TO EYE CARE ACCESS

Systemic and Healthcare System Barriers

Lack of On-Site Services: Many aged care facilities do not provide regular optometry or ophthalmology visits, requiring external referrals (Smith et al., 2022).

Fragmented Care Pathways: Poor coordination between GPs, optometrists, and aged care staff delays diagnosis and treatment (Hussain et al., 2021).

Financial Constraints: Out-of-pocket costs and limited Medicare/insurance coverage deter eye care utilization (Lambert et al., 2019).

RESIDENT-LEVEL BARRIERS

Mobility and Transportation Issues: Physical disabilities and reliance on staff/family for transport make clinic visits difficult (Hooper et al., 2022).

Cognitive and Communication Challenges: Dementia and hearing impairments hinder self-reporting of vision problems (Lawrence et al., 2021).

Misconceptions About Vision Loss: Many residents perceive vision decline as an inevitable part of aging, delaying help-seeking (McClure et al., 2020).

STAFF AND CAREGIVER-RELATED BARRIERS

Limited Eye Health Knowledge: Caregivers often lack training to recognize early signs of vision impairment (O'Connor et al., 2023).

Workload and Prioritization: High staff turnover and competing care demands reduce attention to eye health (Robinson et al., 2023).

ENABLERS TO IMPROVING EYE CARE ACCESS

Service Delivery Innovations

Mobile and On-Site Eye Clinics: Regular optometry visits within facilities improve accessibility (Court et al., 2020).

Tele-Ophthalmology: Remote consultations reduce the need for travel (Jones et al., 2021).

POLICY AND FUNDING SOLUTIONS

Subsidized Eye Care Programs: Government-funded initiatives increase affordability (AIHW, 2022).

Mandatory Vision Screening: Policies requiring routine eye exams in aged care homes enhance early detection (WHO, 2021).

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS STRATEGIES

Staff Training Programs: Workshops on vision assessment improve referral rates (Frost et al., 2022).

Resident and Family Engagement: Awareness campaigns promote proactive eye care (Nguyen et al., 2020).

DISCUSSION

While vision loss is a challenge in these elderly and existing barriers to compliance with the care regimen advised further compound the situation, a multipronged approach is needed to address this emerging challenge. This review highlights multi-level barriers to eye care access in aged care homes, ranging from systemic gaps to individual and staff-related challenges. Promising solutions include integrated service models (e.g., mobile clinics, telehealth), policy reforms, and targeted education. Future research should evaluate the cost-effectiveness of these interventions and explore culturally sensitive approaches for diverse populations.

CONCLUSION

Improving eye care access for aged care residents requires a multi-faceted approach addressing systemic, individual, and organizational barriers. Implementing mobile services, enhancing staff training, and advocating for policy changes can reduce preventable vision loss and improve residents' quality of life.

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