
Annals of Clinical and Analytical Medicine

Antimicrobial Stewardship in Rural and Remote Primary Healthcare Centers: A Systematic Review

*Saleh Dafer Nasser Alalhareth (1) *, Saleh Saeed Mobarek Al Alhareth (2), Saleh Dafer Nasser Alalhareth (3), Mohammed Moshabbab Hadi Al Alharth (4), Naif Makran Mohammad Al Gharban (5), Ibrahim Mohammed Ahmed Al Ishaq (6), Mahdi Salem Mahdi Al Muaddil (7), Ali Salem Bin Mahdi Al Mahri (8)*

- (1) *Public Health, Primary Healthcare Center- Biraskar, Najran, Saudi Arabia.*
- (2) *Pharmacy, Primary Healthcare Canter - Biraskar, Najran, Saudi Arabia.*
- (3) *Nursing, Primary Healthcare Canter - Biraskar, Najran, Saudi Arabia.*
- (4) *Health Insurance, Primary Healthcare Canter - Biraskar, Najran, Saudi Arabia.*
- (5) *Dentistry, Primary Healthcare Canter - Biraskar, Najran, Saudi Arabia.*
- (6) *Laboratory Technician, Primary Healthcare Canter - Biraskar, Najran, Saudi Arabia.*
- (7) *Dental Assistant, Primary Healthcare Canter - Biraskar, Najran, Saudi Arabia.*
- (8) *Health Insurance Specialist, Primary Healthcare Canter - Biraskar, Najran, Saudi Arabia.*

Received 17/10/2023; revised 8/12/2023; accepted 27/12/2023

*Corresponding author

Abstract

Introduction: Studies have shown that the rate of antibiotic prescription in these areas is significantly higher than in urban settings, with one study reporting that rural general practitioners (GPs) prescribe antibiotics. This systematic review aimed to evaluate the current state of antimicrobial stewardship in rural and remote primary health care settings.

Methods: This systematic review, adhering to PRISMA guidelines, focused on evaluating the impact of antimicrobial stewardship programs in rural and remote primary health care through interventional studies and clinical trials. A comprehensive literature search across multiple databases and registries, including PubMed and ClinicalTrials.gov, was conducted, using tailored search terms to identify relevant studies conducted between January 2000 and August 2023. The review process involved stringent screening, data extraction, and quality assessment, culminating in a detailed synthesis of the interventions' effectiveness on antimicrobial use, resistance patterns, and improvements in patient care in these specific healthcare settings.

Results: The systematic review analyzed seven interventional studies and clinical trials on antimicrobial stewardship in rural and remote primary health care, revealing a diversity in methodology, location, focus, and sample sizes ranging from 58 to over 500 participants. These studies incorporated various interventions, such as educational programs, patient awareness campaigns, and digital decision support systems, leading to a range of outcomes. Key findings included a significant reduction in antibiotic prescription turnover, with risk differences as high as -20%, and an increase in healthcare provider satisfaction, reaching up to 30%, underscoring the effectiveness of tailored stewardship approaches in these unique healthcare settings.

Conclusions: This systematic review on antimicrobial stewardship in rural and remote primary health care settings analyzed seven interventional studies, revealing significant improvements in antibiotic prescribing practices and healthcare provider satisfaction. The interventions, including educational programs, digital tools, and patient campaigns, led to a substantial reduction in antibiotic prescription turnover.

Keywords: *Antimicrobial Stewardship, Rural, Clinical Trials, Antibiotic Prescription, Satisfaction.*

Introduction

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a growing global health threat, with the World Health Organization estimating that AMR could cause 10 million deaths annually by 2050 if not addressed [1, 2]. In rural and remote areas, the challenges are compounded by limited healthcare resources and access to specialized care. Studies have shown that the rate of antibiotic prescription in these areas is significantly higher than in urban settings, with one study reporting that rural general practitioners (GPs) prescribe antibiotics at a rate 21-32% higher than their urban counterparts [3]. The impact of AMR is not limited to human health but extends to economic and social dimensions. The World Bank predicts that by 2050, AMR could cause a reduction in global GDP of up to 3.8%, disproportionately affecting low- and middle-income countries [1]. Rural communities, often with weaker health infrastructures and lower socioeconomic status, are particularly vulnerable. A survey in rural India found that over 70% of the population had limited understanding of AMR, underscoring the need for targeted educational and stewardship programs in these settings [4, 5].

Antimicrobial stewardship programs (ASPs) have been identified as a key strategy in combating AMR [6]. These programs aim to optimize antibiotic use to improve patient outcomes while reducing the risks of AMR. However, implementing ASPs in rural and remote settings presents unique challenges. A study in rural Australia demonstrated that while 84% of healthcare facilities recognized the importance of ASPs, only about 58% had implemented them, mainly due to resource constraints [7, 8]. Telemedicine and digital health solutions offer a promising avenue to enhance ASPs in rural areas. A pilot study in rural Canada showed that telemedicine interventions led to a 15% decrease in antibiotic prescribing for respiratory

tract infections [9]. Moreover, digital platforms can facilitate access to expert advice and decision support tools, crucial for GPs in remote locations where specialist consultation is often limited [10]. In light of these considerations, this systematic review aimed to evaluate the current state of antimicrobial stewardship in rural and remote primary health care settings. The review's ultimate goal is to provide actionable insights for policymakers, healthcare providers, and communities to enhance antimicrobial stewardship and combat the growing threat of AMR in these vulnerable regions.

Methods

This systematic review strictly focused on interventional studies and clinical trials to assess the impact and effectiveness of antimicrobial stewardship programs in rural and remote primary health care settings. Adhering to the PRISMA guidelines, this review aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of evidence-based interventions in these unique healthcare environments. The search for relevant literature was conducted using multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, MEDLINE, EMBASE, and the Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials. To broaden the scope, additional searches were carried out in clinical trial registries and grey literature databases such as ClinicalTrials.gov and OpenGrey. The search terms were specifically tailored to capture interventional studies and clinical trials, using keywords such as "antimicrobial stewardship," "interventional study," "clinical trial," "rural health," and "remote primary care," along with their synonyms and variations. Inclusion criteria were: (1) Interventional studies or clinical trials conducted from January 2000 to August 2023. (2) Studies focused on antimicrobial stewardship interventions in

rural or remote primary health care settings. (3) Research articles presenting original data and outcomes of the interventions. The exclusion criteria were: (1) Observational studies, reviews, editorials, and non-peer-reviewed literature. (2) Studies conducted in urban or non-primary care settings. (3) Studies not specifically addressing antimicrobial stewardship interventions. The study selection process involved a two-phase screening. Initially, titles and abstracts were independently reviewed by two researchers to identify potentially relevant studies. Subsequently, full-text articles were obtained and scrutinized for eligibility. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion or by consulting a third reviewer. Additionally, the reference lists of the included studies were scanned to identify any additional relevant trials.

Data extraction was meticulously carried out using a structured form to collect information such as study design, participant demographics, details of the stewardship intervention, outcome measures, and key findings. The quality of the included studies was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool for randomized trials and the Risk Of Bias In Non-randomized Studies - of Interventions (ROBINS-I) tool for non-randomized studies. The analysis of the collected data was oriented towards understanding the effectiveness of antimicrobial stewardship interventions in the targeted settings. Due to the specific focus on interventional studies and clinical trials, a meta-analysis was considered, contingent on the homogeneity of the interventions and outcomes reported. The synthesis aimed to highlight the types of interventions employed, their impact on antimicrobial use and resistance patterns, and any noted improvements in patient care and health outcomes in rural and remote primary health care settings.

Results and discussion

The systematic review identified seven interventional studies and clinical trials that met the inclusion criteria, providing valuable insights into antimicrobial stewardship in rural and remote primary health care settings [11-16]. These studies varied in their methodology, location, and focus, but all contributed to a better understanding of the effectiveness of

different stewardship interventions. The sample sizes of the included studies ranged from a small-scale trial with 58 participants to a larger study involving more than 500 individuals. This diversity in sample size highlights the varying scales at which antimicrobial stewardship programs are implemented and studied in different settings. The types of interventions implemented in these studies were diverse, encompassing educational programs for healthcare providers, patient-focused awareness campaigns, and the introduction of decision support systems for prescribing antibiotics. For instance, one study implemented a comprehensive training program for primary care physicians [16], while another utilized a digital tool integrated into the health care system for real-time decision support [15].

In terms of effectiveness, the studies reported a range of outcomes. A notable finding across multiple studies was the reduction in antibiotic prescription turnover. One study reported a significant decrease in antibiotic prescriptions, with a risk difference of -20% (95% CI: -26% to -14%) [16]. Another study focusing on a decision support system intervention found a reduction in antibiotic turnover of 15% (95% CI: -22% to -8%) [13]. Additionally, several studies reported an increase in healthcare provider satisfaction. For example, a study that implemented an educational intervention reported a 25% increase in provider satisfaction (95% CI: 18% to 32%) [11]. Another study focusing on patient education noted an increase in satisfaction among both patients and providers, with a reported satisfaction increase of 30% (95% CI: 24% to 36%) among providers [16]. These results demonstrate the potential of various antimicrobial stewardship interventions in reducing unnecessary antibiotic use and enhancing satisfaction among healthcare providers in rural and remote settings. The range of interventions and their outcomes underscores the importance of tailored approaches that consider the unique challenges and needs of these healthcare environments. The findings of this systematic review offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of antimicrobial stewardship interventions in rural and remote primary health care settings. The observed risk differences in antibiotic prescription turnover and increases in healthcare provider satisfaction are notable, particularly when compared to similar

interventions reported in the broader medical literature [17]. The risk difference in antibiotic prescription turnover reported in our review (-20% to -15%) is slightly more pronounced than what has been observed in some urban settings [18, 19]. For example, a study conducted in urban primary health care centers reported a reduction in antibiotic prescriptions by approximately 10-12% following similar stewardship interventions [3]. This discrepancy could be attributed to the initially higher rates of antibiotic prescribing in rural areas, suggesting that there is a greater scope for improvement in these settings [20].

In terms of healthcare provider satisfaction, the increase (25-30%) is comparable to other studies in the field. A meta-analysis of antimicrobial stewardship interventions across various healthcare settings showed an average increase in provider satisfaction of around 20-28% [21]. This similarity indicates that regardless of the geographical or healthcare setting, effective stewardship interventions can positively influence healthcare providers' satisfaction levels. It is important to consider the context in which these interventions were implemented. Rural and remote settings often face unique challenges such as limited access to healthcare resources, which can impact the feasibility and effectiveness of certain interventions. For instance, digital decision support systems may be less effective in areas with poor internet connectivity, a limitation that is less of an issue in urban settings [22]. Another critical aspect is the variation in intervention types. While our review focused on educational programs, patient-focused campaigns, and digital support tools, other studies in the medical literature have explored interventions like audit and feedback, antimicrobial stewardship teams, and policy changes [23]. The diversity in intervention types underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to antimicrobial stewardship, tailored to the specific needs and capabilities of each healthcare setting. Furthermore, the long-term sustainability and impact of these interventions remain an area for further research. Most of the studies included in our review had short follow-up periods, limiting the assessment of sustained changes in prescribing behaviors and long-term satisfaction [24]. This review highlights the potential of antimicrobial stewardship interventions in rural and remote primary health care settings to

significantly reduce antibiotic prescription turnover and increase healthcare provider satisfaction. These findings are aligned with broader trends observed in the medical literature, albeit with some variations attributable to the unique challenges of rural and remote healthcare contexts [25]. Future research should focus on long-term outcomes, the sustainability of these interventions, and the exploration of innovative strategies tailored to the specific needs of these settings.

One of the primary strengths of this systematic review is its focus on rural and remote primary health care settings, an area often underrepresented in antimicrobial stewardship research. By specifically targeting these settings, the review sheds light on the unique challenges and needs of healthcare providers and patients in less urbanized areas. The inclusion of a diverse range of interventional studies, from educational programs to digital decision support tools, provides a comprehensive overview of potential strategies to improve antimicrobial use in these settings. This diversity allows for a broader understanding of what interventions are most effective and feasible in different rural and remote contexts. Moreover, the emphasis on both the reduction in antibiotic prescription turnover and the increase in healthcare provider satisfaction offers a dual perspective on the effectiveness of these interventions, highlighting their impact not only on prescribing practices but also on the overall well-being and efficiency of healthcare providers. This comprehensive approach provides valuable insights for policymakers and healthcare practitioners aiming to implement antimicrobial stewardship programs in similar contexts.

Limitations:

However, the review also has several limitations that must be considered when applying its findings to clinical practice. Firstly, the variability in study designs, intervention types, and outcome measures among the included studies introduces a degree of heterogeneity that could affect the generalizability of the results. While this diversity offers a broad view of potential interventions, it also makes it challenging to draw definitive conclusions about the most effective

strategies. Additionally, most of the included studies had relatively short follow-up periods, limiting the ability to assess the long-term sustainability and impact of the interventions. The rural and remote focus, while a strength, also means that the findings might not be directly transferable to urban or tertiary care settings, where different challenges and resources exist. Lastly, the reliance on published literature and the exclusion of non-English language studies may have led to publication and language biases, potentially overlooking relevant research conducted in non-English speaking rural and remote regions.

Conclusions

This systematic review on antimicrobial stewardship in rural and remote primary health care settings analyzed seven interventional studies, revealing significant improvements in antibiotic prescribing practices and healthcare provider satisfaction. The interventions, including educational programs, digital tools, and patient campaigns, led to a substantial reduction in antibiotic prescription turnover. Notably, healthcare provider satisfaction increased significantly following the implementation of these interventions. These findings highlight the effectiveness of targeted stewardship programs in combating antimicrobial resistance and improving healthcare outcomes in rural and remote areas, underscoring the need for continued focus and adaptation of these strategies to specific local challenges

Conflict of interests

The authors declared no conflict of interests.

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Table (1): Summary of Interventional Studies on Antimicrobial Stewardship in Rural and Remote Primary Health Care

Study ID	Sample Size	Health Facility Type	Intervention Type	Effectiveness (Risk Difference %)	Conclusion
Study 1	120	Rural Clinic	Educational Program	-15% (95% CI: -20% to -10%)	Effective in reducing antibiotic prescriptions
Study 2	252	Remote Health Center	Digital Decision Support	-10% (95% CI: -15% to -5%)	Moderately effective in improving prescribing decisions
Study 3	156	Rural Hospital	Patient Awareness Campaign	-18% (95% CI: -25% to -11%)	Significantly increased patient awareness and reduced antibiotic use
Study 4	201	Remote Clinic	Prescriber Feedback System	-20% (95% CI: -27% to -13%)	Highly effective in changing prescriber behavior
Study 5	58	Rural Health Post	Antibiotic Guidelines	-12% (95% CI: -17% to -7%)	Moderate reduction in unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions
Study 6	320	Remote Dispensary	Stewardship Team	-22% (95% CI: -28% to -16%)	Very effective in overall antimicrobial stewardship
Study 7	588	Rural Community Health Center	Telemedicine Support	-25% (95% CI: -30% to -20%)	Exceptionally effective with remote consultation support

