



**OPERATIONAL
RESEARCH
SNAPSHOT**

Reducing Delays in Emergency Care in Humanitarian Settings



In a medical emergency, every second counts. Late arrival at the hospital or delayed treatment pose severe health risks for patients, particularly in humanitarian and low-resource settings.

For medical care to be effective, timely diagnosis and treatment are essential. In humanitarian contexts, avoiding delays is particularly challenging, as health care systems are disrupted or are lacking resources, and communities are highly vulnerable.

This study analyzed factors associated with late arrival at and treatment delays in the emergency departments of three hospitals supported by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Afghanistan, Haiti, and Sierra Leone, looking to improve emergency medical systems serving vulnerable populations.





Across the hospitals in Afghanistan, Haiti, and Sierra Leone, delays in arrival at the emergency department were present in almost 28% of cases. At least one out of four patients experienced a delay in treatment.



Factors associated with late arrival at the emergency department include the patient's gender, age, and the type of diagnosis. Women and girls, children under 5, and patients without trauma were at higher risks of reaching a hospital late.



Women are known to reach hospitals with delay due to a lack of education and cultural barriers. Illiteracy may contribute to poor understanding of medical needs, and many women cannot leave their home for a longer time, while transportation costs and fees further hinder access to emergency services.



IMPLEMENTATION

The study recommends health education targeting women and illiterate patients to increase awareness for medical needs and the importance of timely treatment. Traditional healers or birth attendants also need to be engaged to help build a community's trust in institutional health centers.

Eliminating health care fees improves access to health care services and can decrease treatment delays. In Sierra Leone, the government introduced the Free Health Care Initiative, aiming to remove user fees for children under 5, and pregnant and lactating women.

Original Study: Beltrán Guzmán, I; Gil Cuesta, J; Trelles, M; Jaweed, O; Cherestal, S; van Loenhout, J; Guha-Sapir, D (2019) Delays in arrival and treatment in emergency departments: Women, children and non-trauma consultations the most at risk in humanitarian settings. Submitted to PLOS ONE, under review.

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