



Original Research Article

Saudi Medical Journal of Students (SMJS)

Official Journal of Faculty of Medicine University of Tabuk

ISSN: 1658-8274 (Print version); 1658-8282 (Electronic version)

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PATIENT'S CHOICE OF A HEALTHCARE PROVIDER, TABUK, SAUDI ARABIA, 2018.

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is an increasing awareness regarding the patient's choice of a healthcare provider. Data are scarce regarding this important issue in Saudi Arabia.

Substance and Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted among 506 adults randomly selected in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, during the period from June 2018 to September 2018. Participants responded to an electronic-based checklist to collect the demographic data, preference to choose a specific doctor, recommending a doctor to the family and friends, the effects of doctor's character and nationality, the importance of discussion of the treatment options available and counseling, the importance of the clinical examination to the Patient, and the effect of medical insurance on the choice of a healthcare provider. The ethical committee of the Medical College, University of Tabuk approved the research, and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences was used for data analysis.

Results: Participants (79.2% males), their age was 28.06 ± 15.42 years, 61.2% preferred specific doctor, the most important influential factors were counseling and discussion of the treatment options (97.4% and 98.2% respectively), nationality and medical insurance was cited by 51.9% and 57.3% respectively, good hospital practice in 75.7%, friends recommendation (34.7%), proximity to home (22.7%), less crowded hospital (20.8%), physician nationalities (5.9%), physician's gender(4%), and proximity to work (2.4%)

Conclusion: The most important factors influencing the doctor preference was Doctor/patient relationship, other factors were less.

Keywords: Healthcare provider, Patient's preference, Physicians, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia

To cite this article: Alshahrani AS, Albalawi AN, Albalawi MS, Abualreesh BM, Almesar AK, Alelyani AA. Mirghani HO. Factors Influencing The Patient's Choice Of A Healthcare Provider, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, 2018. Saudi Med J Students. 2022;3(1):5-10.

INTRODUCTION

A healthcare provider or physician selection has become increasingly complex and difficult, and there is an increasing awareness regarding the patient decision in choosing a provider due to the increasing in consumer-centric health insurance plans. The decision regarding the selection of healthcare or a doctor is usually performed in the face of minimal information from other healthcare provider or consumers [1].

When a new health-related event started to effect a patient's life he will start seeking for an answers to relieve his symptoms, and then he gets to the face of a hard decision about where he should go to find treatment. There are a variety of complex factors in the physician and the Patient, and due to lack of ranking system and limited financial situation to the Patient, he will most likely make his own way to find a doctor that fits his own criteria, either finding the best quality care that fits his financial situation or find a doctor he personally know or he will go to the closest one to his home or work and some time the severity is the factor to determine which doctor he will go to [2]. A previous study showed that only (10-13%) of the patients who carefully and actively choose their doctors are the well educated young patients with high income, or patients who had past experience with bad health care facility or patients who have a relationship with the health care provider or the physician. [3]. Another studies found that every area they studied has its own preferences and characteristics to their doctor either regarding their culture, ethnic background, or therapeutic preferences [3]. The assessment of factors influencing the Patient's selection of a healthcare providers and treating doctors will help the policy makers in targeting

Table 1. Basic characteristics of the study group

Character	No%
Gender	
Males	79.2%
Females	17.2%
Not defined	3.6%
Nationality	
Saudi	96%
Non-Saudi	4%
Medical insurance	
Yes	20.7%
No	79.3%
Knowledge regarding physical examination	
Yes	77.7%
No	22.3%
Age (mean \pm SD)	28.06 \pm 15.42

specific areas for improvement. To our best of knowledge, no studies have investigated the factors affecting the Patient's choice of physician in Saudi Arabia. The good understanding of the Patient's needs and what he thinks of, will absolutely improves healthcare and will bring up the competition between the healthcare providers which will give hopefully a good impact on the health services in the area that hopefully can be source of in-formation that will help the Patient at his choice.

Therefore, we aimed to find the factors influencing Patient's choice of physicians and healthcare provider among Tabuk population by an electronic survey.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

The ethical committee of the Medical College, University of Tabuk approved the

STUDY VARIABLES AND DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Table 2. The general view of the participants view regarding how to choose a specific doctor

Question	No%			
Is there any specific doctor you prefer to take your family and friends to?	Yes	61.2%	No	38.8%
If the answer is yes. Are you going to recommend him to family and friends?	Yes	76.6%	No	23.4%
Is the doctor's charisma and personal characters effect your choice?	Yes	72.4%	No	27.6%
Which nationality do you prefer?	Saudi	57.7%	Non-Saudi	42.3%
Is it important to be counseled about your illness?	Yes	97.4%	No	2.6%
Is important to be examined if necessary?	Yes	83.8%	No	16.2%
Is it important to know the therapeutic options available?	Yes	98.2%	No	1.8%
Can medical insurance affect your choice of a private clinic because you don't have an insurance?	Yes	51.9%	No	48.1%
Does insurance affect your choice of a doctor?	Yes	47.7%	No	52.3%

research. This cross-sectional study conducted among 506 adults randomly selected in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. The study was conducted during the period from June 2018 to September 2018.

SAMPLE SIZE AND TECHNIQUE

After explaining the purpose of the study and that the data will be used for the purpose of the study, an electronic survey was conducted to complete a checklist during the stated period. Five hundred and six participants completed the questionnaire.

The sample size was calculated by the formula: $n=ZP-Q$ where $Z = 95\%$ confidence (1.96), $P =$ prevalence assuming that the prevalence is 50%, $Q=100\text{-prevalence}$, and $d=\text{tolerated error.} = 400$ and was found to be 400 and was increased to 506 to minimize the error.

A checklist was prepared from the previous literature and approved by a Family Medicine Physician and an Internist. It consisted of two parts; the first part inquired about the demographic data, if medically insured, and the participant's knowledge regarding the physical examination. The second part consisted of nine (yes, no choice) questions: Is there any specific doctor you prefer to take your family and friends to? If the answer is yes. Are you going to recommend him to family and friends? Do the doctor's charisma and personal characters affect your choice? Which nationality do you prefer? Is it essential to be counseled about your illness? Is it important to know the therapeutic options available? Can medical insurance affect your choice of a private clinic? Does insurance affect your choice of a doctor? Two

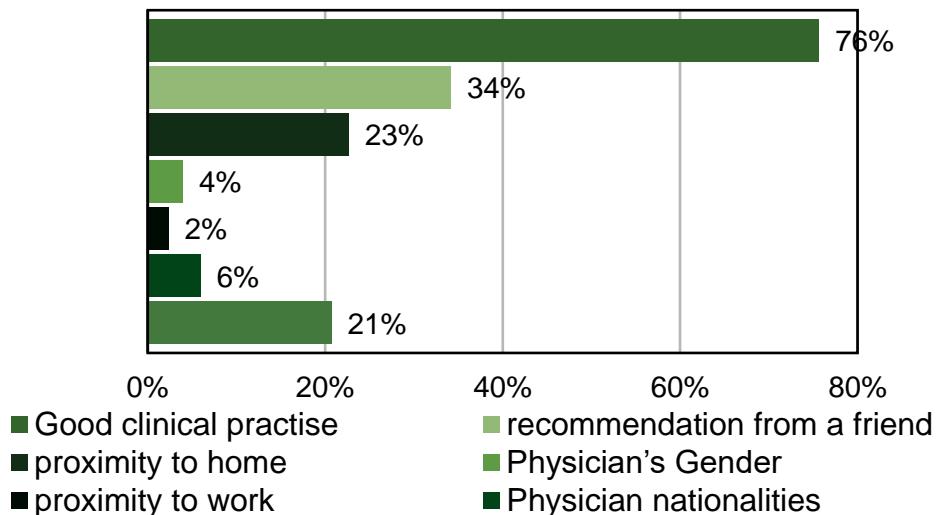


Figure1.The most important chosen factors affecting the choice of specific hospital

open-ended questions were left for the participants to list the most important factors that influence their doctor or healthcare provider selection.

RESULTS

Participants (506, 96% of them are Saudis), 79.2% were males, their ages ranged from 18 - 79 years, mean \pm standard deviation (28.06 \pm 15.42), only 20.7% had medical insurance, and 77.7% knew what physical examination is. Table 1.

Table 2 depicted the overall patient satisfaction in which only 61.2% of the patients preferred a specific doctor to treat their condition, while 76.6% will recommend that doctor to their family and friends. Regarding the personal characteristics of the doctor, 72.4% of the participants showed an interest in the physician personal character, 57.7% of participants prefer Saudi doctor, while 42.3% prefer other nationalities.

Regarding the delivery of information and patient engagement; 98.2% reported that is important to know their treatment options

and 97.4% like a scientific information and knowledge regarding their illness.

Regarding the clinical examination, 83.8% of participants viewed it as an important factor. The current data showed that, about half of the sample said that medical insurance will not stop them from going to a good doctor if needed, while 50% couldn't afford to pay. The most important factors affecting the choice of specific hospital or clinic were good clinical practice (75.7%), recommendation from a friend (34.2%), proximity to home (22.7%), less crowded hospital (20.8%), physician nationalities (5.9%), physician's gender (4%), and proximity to work (2.4%). Figure 1

The current data showed that, the most important factors affecting the choice of specific doctor is Physician communication 84.4%, followed by Doctor-patient relationship 44.3%, nationalities 7.9%, age 7.5%, gender 5.5%, Physician appearance 4.8%, charisma and manners 1.1%. Figure 2

DISCUSSION

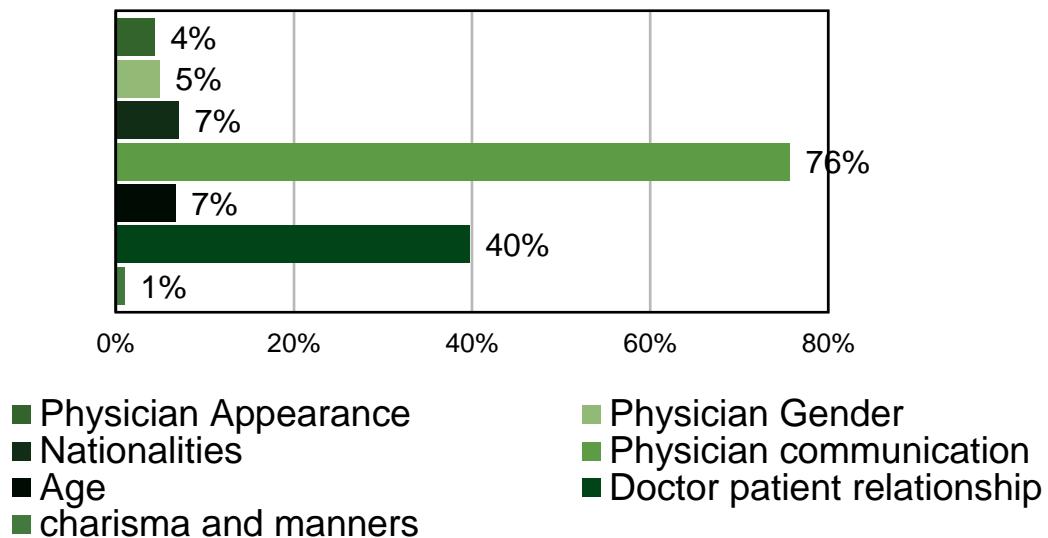


Figure 2: The most important chosen factors affecting the choice of specific Doctor

In the present study, nearly two third of participants were concerned about which doctor is to bring to their family and friends. The most influencing factors were the doctor's communication, clinical examination, and the doctor character, while medical insurance, and the doctor nationality, were found in equal proportions among the participants. The current study showed that two in three participants are carefully choosing their doctor, this is higher than a previous study by Bernard ME, Sadikman JC, Sadikman CL. (2006) [3] found that only 10-13% of participants were actively choosing the treating physician, socioeconomic factors and the patients past experience could explain the difference. The most important factors for a hospital choice were good clinical practice and recommendation from a friend. The present finding were similar to a study conducted in Mayo Clinic [3] and found that the approach to patient care, and interpersonal skills/communication were the most cited factors affecting the doctor choice.

A study published in Korea [4] found that whether or not a doctor was graduated from a high quality University is related to the Patient's choice of a doctor in line with the current findings in which good clinical practice is the most important factor affecting the Patient's choice of a healthcare provider. A previous study published by Manning et al. [5] found that board certification, being well known for a specific area of expertise, and health insurance in-network providers were the most factors affecting the doctor selection in agreement with the current findings except for medical insurance which was cited in equal proportion by participants, plausible explanations could be that the healthcare system is of high caliber and well equipped in Saudi Arabia and accessible to all citizens free of charge and the fact that the previous study was about Orthopedic Sport Medicine Physician choice which may be more demanding and expensive. The current data were similar to Sahama et al. [6] who published a study in Australia and concluded that medical system was selected for its effectiveness, safety, and credentials and care, while

cost, empowerment and rapport were less. In the present study, the most important factors affecting the choice of specific Doctor were Physician communication 84.4%, followed by Doctor-patient relationship, while the proximity to home or work was less indicating that the patients are willing to travel long distance for a good care hospitals. These present findings were similar to a study conducted in India [7] in which the most important attributes were physician and staff attitude towards the Patient, effectiveness of care, and familiarity of the Patient with the doctor. In the later study, the patients prefer shorted distance, but the importance of the attribute of distance to the facility was relatively low in similarity to the present findings in which only 2.4% preferred a nearby hospital. Another study published by Kim et al.[4] found that, the physician age affects patients' choice of physician at the first visit in a tertiary university hospital in contradiction to the present findings in which the age was important in only 5.5% of participants, social and cultural factors may explain the contradicting findings.

The universal health coverage present in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the minimal healthcare out-of-pocket expenditures is highly encouraged. More effort focusing on the patients/doctor relationship is needed. The study limitations were the cross-sectional nature of the study, the reliance on a self-administered electronic-based checklist which is more prone to subjectivity, and the fact that the study was conducted in a single City, so the current findings cannot be generalized to the whole Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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