

Bariatric Surgery in Public Sector Hospitals in Pakistan: Current Status, Challenges and Future Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Obesity is a growing health crisis in Pakistan, with significant gender disparity and a rising prevalence among urban populations. Bariatric surgery is a highly effective intervention for severe obesity, yet public sector hospitals face multiple challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of trained professionals, limited awareness and lack of insurance coverage, making the surgery largely inaccessible. To improve bariatric surgery availability, the government should invest in infrastructure, promote public-private partnerships, expand the bariatric workforce, launch awareness campaigns and push for insurance reforms. These measures are essential for expanding access to bariatric surgery and enhancing public health outcomes in Pakistan.

Keywords: Bariatric surgery; Obesity rate; World health organization; Gastroesophageal reflux disease

Introduction

Obesity has emerged as a significant health concern globally, affecting almost every country and is expected to increase further in the coming decades¹⁻³. In Pakistan, obesity has become a grave concern, mirroring this global epidemic. With an obesity rate of 28.7%, the country is witnessing a dramatic rise in individuals grappling with this complex health issue. According to the World Health Organization, 26% of women in Pakistan suffer from obesity, compared to 19% of men, indicating a significant gender disparity. The prevalence of obesity is also notably higher in urban areas (56% of males and 67% of females) compared to rural regions, with a growing trend even among youth⁴. Beyond its cosmetic implications, obesity poses a substantial risk to overall health, contributing to various conditions such as Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, stroke, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), joint problems, cholestasis and some cancers⁵.

Addressing obesity requires a multimodal treatment approach. Among the most effective interventions for severe obesity is bariatric surgery, which offers a potential lifeline for those struggling with this condition. Bariatric surgery is recommended for patients with a body mass index (BMI) greater than 40 kg/m² or those with a BMI above 35 kg/m² accompanied by comorbidities⁶. This surgical approach has been proven to be highly effective in achieving substantial and sustained weight loss, surpassing conservative approaches and significantly improving or resolving obesity-related comorbidities^{7,8}. There are various surgical techniques available, including laparoscopic gastric banding, gastric bypass, sleeve gastrectomy and biliopancreatic diversion, with the choice of procedure depending on factors like long-term outcomes, complication rates and patient circumstances. Moreover, structured lifelong follow-up is essential to prevent metabolic deficiencies and related complications post-surgery⁶.

Despite its effectiveness, the current state of bariatric surgery in public sector hospitals in Pakistan remains underdeveloped, facing numerous challenges that limit its progress. Public hospitals, which serve a large portion of the population, struggle with inadequate facilities, a shortage of trained professionals, limited awareness and insufficient financial support, making bariatric surgery inaccessible to many individuals in need. Addressing these issues is crucial to improving the overall health and well-being of the population.

This editorial aims to shed light on the current status, challenges and future recommendations for bariatric surgery in public sector hospitals in Pakistan. By examining the existing landscape, we can identify the hurdles impeding the widespread availability and accessibility of bariatric surgery and propose practical solutions to overcome them. Exploring innovative approaches and collaborating with stakeholders are imperative to bridge the gap between the current state and the ideal future for bariatric surgery in Pakistan. Through these efforts, we aim to pave the way for a healthier, happier and more vibrant nation.

The Current Status Of Bariatric Surgery In Public Sector Hospitals In Pakistan

The current status of bariatric surgery in public sector hospitals in Pakistan is far from ideal, presenting a significant challenge in addressing the rising obesity epidemic. Public sector hospitals, which cater to a large portion of the population, face various obstacles in providing effective bariatric surgery services.

- A. Lack of Facilities and Infrastructure:** Public sector hospitals in Pakistan often struggle with limited facilities and infrastructure required for performing bariatric surgeries. These hospitals are frequently overcrowded, understaffed and underfunded, resulting in a lack of specialized units and dedicated operating theaters for bariatric procedures. The absence of advanced equipment and surgical instruments further hampers the surgical outcomes and limits the capacity to cater to a larger number of patients in need of bariatric surgery.
- B. Shortage of Trained Professionals** One of the key challenges in public sector hospitals is the scarcity of trained professionals, specifically bariatric surgeons. Bariatric surgery is a specialized field that demands expertise and experience to ensure safe and successful procedures. However, the number of trained bariatric surgeons in Pakistan, especially in the public sector, is insufficient to meet the growing demand. This shortage restricts the access to bariatric surgery services for patients seeking treatment in public sector hospitals.
- C. Limited Awareness and Understanding** A significant hurdle in the provision of bariatric surgery is the limited awareness and understanding of its benefits among the general public and healthcare providers. Many individuals in Pakistan still perceive obesity as a cosmetic issue rather than a serious health concern. Consequently, the potential health risks associated with obesity and the effectiveness of bariatric surgery as a treatment option remain underappreciated. Healthcare providers, including primary care physicians, often lack the knowledge and training to identify and manage obesity effectively, resulting in inadequate referrals for bariatric surgery.

- D. Lack of Insurance Coverage** The current lack of insurance coverage for bariatric surgery poses another obstacle to its accessibility in public sector hospitals. Insurance companies in Pakistan often do not consider bariatric surgery as a necessary medical intervention and thus do not provide coverage for the procedure. As a result, individuals who could benefit from bariatric surgery face significant financial barriers, as they are required to bear the entire cost of the surgery themselves.

Challenges Faced By Public Sector Hospitals In Providing Bariatric Surgery

- A. Lack of Resources and Infrastructure:** Public sector hospitals in Pakistan are often plagued by the issue of inadequate infrastructure. The demand for bariatric surgery requires specialized facilities, equipment and trained support staff, all of which are lacking in most public hospitals. Equipment such as laparoscopic systems, surgical beds designed for obese patients and specialized anesthetic equipment are crucial for these procedures, yet they are in short supply. This scarcity limits the availability of bariatric surgery in the public sector, making it a treatment mostly accessible in privately funded hospitals where patients bear a hefty financial burden.
- B. Shortage of Trained Professionals:** Bariatric surgery is a complex procedure that requires specialized skills, not only on the part of the surgeon but also from anesthesiologists, nurses and dietitians. In Pakistan, the public sector is suffering from a significant shortage of healthcare professionals who are trained in obesity management and bariatric surgery. The few qualified bariatric surgeons tend to be concentrated in urban areas or are practicing in the private sector due to better facilities and compensation. This disparity in access to skilled professional results in limited capacity to offer bariatric surgery in public hospitals and leads to an underserved patient population, especially in rural and underdeveloped regions.
- C. Limited Awareness among Public and Healthcare Providers:** The lack of awareness is one of the major roadblocks for the growth of bariatric surgery in Pakistan. Obesity is often viewed merely as a cosmetic issue rather than a significant medical condition. Many people are unaware of the life-changing benefits of bariatric surgery, such as improvement in Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and overall quality of life. This misconception also exists among healthcare providers, who often fail to refer suitable patients for bariatric surgery or lack the proper knowledge about when and for whom this procedure might be beneficial. Consequently, many patients who could potentially benefit from bariatric surgery are left untreated or continue struggling with obesity without proper management.
- D. Financial Barriers and Lack of Insurance Coverage:** Bariatric surgery is a costly procedure, especially when compared to the average household income in Pakistan. Unfortunately, in the public sector, resources for funding these surgeries are limited and there is minimal government backing to subsidize costs for underprivileged patients. Additionally, insurance companies in Pakistan do not consider bariatric surgery as an essential or standard medical procedure, excluding it from their policies. Without

insurance coverage, bariatric surgery remains financially unattainable for many people, especially those reliant on public hospitals for affordable healthcare.

Future Recommendations For Improving Bariatric Surgery In Public Sector Hospitals

- A. Government Support and Funding:** The government must play an active role in bridging the resource gap. Allocating additional funds specifically aimed at improving surgical infrastructure in public hospitals is a crucial step. Upgrading operation theatres, procuring advanced laparoscopic systems and acquiring suitable equipment for handling morbidly obese patients would allow for safer and more efficient bariatric surgeries. Moreover, financial backing is necessary to subsidize surgeries, particularly for underprivileged patients, to make these potentially life-saving procedures accessible to a broader population.
- B. Development of Public-Private Partnerships:** A potential solution to enhance access to bariatric surgery is the development of public-private partnerships. Collaborations between public hospitals and private healthcare providers could help utilize existing private-sector resources while benefiting under-resourced public institutions. Through these partnerships, the government could outsource training for healthcare professionals and acquire the necessary technology. This would improve public-sector hospitals' capacity without overburdening the national budget, leveraging the strengths of both sectors to deliver more comprehensive care.
- C. Expansion of the Bariatric Surgery Workforce:** A shortage of qualified bariatric surgeons and support staff can only be addressed through the expansion of training opportunities. The government should establish specialized training programs focused on obesity management and bariatric surgery for surgeons, anesthetists and nursing staff. Incentives such as scholarships and better remuneration can encourage doctors to specialize in this field and choose careers in the public sector. Furthermore, a structured fellowship program for aspiring bariatric surgeons could lead to an expansion of a skilled workforce across Pakistan, particularly in underserved areas.
- D. Awareness Campaigns:** Changing the public perception of obesity and its treatment is critical. Launching nationwide awareness campaigns that educate people on the health risks associated with obesity and the benefits of surgical intervention can reduce the stigma surrounding bariatric surgery. By using media, seminars and educational content in collaboration with healthcare facilities, the government could help individuals recognize obesity as a medical issue that warrants proper treatment. Similarly, training programs and workshops for healthcare providers on obesity management could improve the frequency and accuracy of referrals for bariatric surgery.

- E. Insurance Coverage and Financial Support:** The role of insurance coverage cannot be overstated in making bariatric surgery more accessible. Advocacy for including bariatric surgery in insurance policies is necessary, as obesity is a medical condition that significantly impacts long-term health. With more awareness among policymakers and health insurance companies, bariatric surgery could be recognized as a preventive and life-saving intervention. Additionally, the government could explore subsidized programs to aid financially burdened patients seeking surgical intervention, helping them overcome financial barriers and access essential care.

Conclusion

Obesity in Pakistan requires urgent intervention, with bariatric surgery as a key solution. However, public sector hospitals face challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited expertise, low awareness and lack of insurance support. A comprehensive strategy involving increased funding, public-private partnerships, workforce training, insurance reforms and awareness campaigns is crucial. By expanding access to bariatric surgery through these measures, Pakistan can effectively tackle obesity and enhance public health.

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