

Health and Digital Literacy Disparities in a Safety-Net Breast Surgical Oncology Clinic: Barriers to Equitable Care

Abstract:

Background: Sociodemographic factors, including language, education, race, and insurance status, significantly influence patient outcomes following breast surgery, especially in safety-net hospitals (SNHs) that serve vulnerable populations.

Objective: To assess the sociodemographic composition of a breast surgical oncology clinic at an urban SNH and evaluate how these factors impact digital literacy, health literacy, and access to care.

Methods: English and Spanish-speaking adult female patients at an urban SNH breast surgical oncology clinic between August and October 2022 completed a survey assessing digital and health literacy, barriers to care, and sociodemographic information. Descriptive statistics and comparative analyses were performed using Chi-squared and Fisher's exact tests.

Results: Of 127 invited patients, 95 (75%) completed the survey. The median age was 50 years. Fifty-seven percent identified as Hispanic, 43.2% preferred Spanish, and 40% had less than a high school education. Health literacy was lower among Spanish-speaking, older, and less-educated patients. Digital literacy was also lower among these groups, with notable disparities in access to computers, the internet, and smartphones.

Conclusion: Significant disparities in health and digital literacy exist among vulnerable breast cancer patients at SNHs, particularly among Spanish-speaking, older, and less-educated individuals. Targeted interventions to improve education, access to digital resources, and supportive services are essential to ensure equitable care and improve health outcomes for these populations.