Patient Experiences with Hemophilia Treatment: A Qualitative Study on Quality of Life and Treatment Access

Jalal A. Hassan[1], Abdulmohsen A. Alotaibi[2], Saud M. Awaji[3], Turki K. Ainosah[4], Saleh S. Almutairi[5]

Health Affairs at the Ministry of National Guard

Abstract

Background: Hemophilia is a chronic condition requiring lifelong management, but patients often face significant barriers in accessing treatment. These barriers, along with treatment side effects, can severely impact quality of life.

Objective: This qualitative study explores the experiences of hemophilia patients with treatment access, side effects, and the impact on their quality of life.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 hemophilia patients at a tertiary hospital. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to treatment access, quality of life, and side effects.

Results: The findings revealed financial and geographic barriers to treatment, significant physical and emotional impacts on quality of life, and frequent side effects from factor replacement therapy, including joint pain and infusion-related complications.

Conclusion: Addressing treatment access barriers, providing mental health support, and minimizing treatment side effects are crucial for improving hemophilia care and patient outcomes.

Keywords: Hemophilia, treatment access, quality of life, side effects, financial barriers, qualitative study

Introduction

Hemophilia is a rare, inherited bleeding disorder that primarily affects males and is characterized by a deficiency in clotting factors, most commonly factor VIII (hemophilia A) or factor IX (hemophilia B). Individuals with hemophilia experience frequent bleeding episodes, often into joints and muscles, which can lead to chronic pain, joint damage, and long-term disability if not adequately treated (Srivastava et al., 2013). The standard treatment for hemophilia involves regular administration of clotting factor concentrates, which can be administered on-demand or as part of a prophylactic regimen to prevent bleeding episodes. Despite significant advances in treatment, patients with hemophilia continue to face substantial challenges, particularly in terms of treatment access and its impact on their quality of life (Pocoski et al., 2014).

Access to treatment is a critical issue for hemophilia patients. The cost of factor replacement therapy is high, and access to specialized care can be limited, especially in low-resource settings or rural areas. Even in well-resourced healthcare systems, insurance coverage, geographic location, and the availability of specialized

healthcare providers can significantly impact a patient's ability to receive consistent, life-saving treatment (Peters and Harris, 2018). These barriers can exacerbate the physical and psychological burdens of living with hemophilia, as untreated or inadequately treated bleeds can lead to pain, mobility limitations, and decreased participation in daily activities.

In addition to challenges with treatment access, hemophilia significantly affects patients' overall quality of life. The chronic nature of the disease requires lifelong management, which can lead to psychological stress, social isolation, and financial strain (Pocoski et al., 2014). Side effects from treatment, such as joint pain or complications from frequent infusions, further impact the daily lives of patients and may deter adherence to treatment regimens. Understanding how patients navigate these challenges, including how they perceive the accessibility of treatment and manage its side effects, is crucial for improving patient care and enhancing their quality of life.

Despite the availability of quantitative data on treatment outcomes and clinical efficacy, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of hemophilia patients. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring patient experiences with hemophilia treatment, focusing on how treatment access and side effects influence their quality of life. Through in-depth interviews, this research seeks to provide insights into the personal and systemic challenges faced by hemophilia patients, with the goal of informing more patient-centered approaches to treatment and support.

Literature Review

Hemophilia and Treatment Approaches

Hemophilia, a rare genetic disorder characterized by deficiencies in clotting factors VIII (hemophilia A) or IX (hemophilia B), requires lifelong management to prevent and control bleeding episodes. Without treatment, spontaneous bleeds, particularly into joints and muscles, can lead to chronic pain, disability, and joint deformities (Srivastava et al., 2013). The primary treatment for hemophilia is factor replacement therapy, which involves intravenous administration of clotting factor concentrates. These can be delivered on-demand during bleeding episodes or prophylactically to prevent bleeds. Prophylactic treatment has been shown to reduce joint damage and improve long-term outcomes (Pocoski et al., 2014).

Despite the availability of effective treatments, there are still significant challenges related to treatment access and adherence. For many patients, the cost of factor replacement therapy is prohibitively high, and access to specialized care may be limited, particularly in low-resource settings (Peters and Harris, 2018). Emerging treatments, such as gene therapy and non-factor replacement therapies, offer hope for more accessible and cost-effective solutions, but these innovations are still in the experimental or early adoption stages (Cafuir and Kempton, 2017).

Barriers to Treatment Access

Access to hemophilia treatment is heavily influenced by a range of factors, including geographic location, economic status, and healthcare infrastructure. In low-income countries, only a fraction of the population has access to regular factor replacement therapy due to cost, limited healthcare services, and lack of awareness (Srivastava et al., 2013). Even in high-income countries, patients may face financial barriers due to inadequate insurance coverage, high out-of-pocket costs, or the need for lifelong care (Gouw et al., 2007). Geographic barriers are also a significant issue, as many patients live far from specialized hemophilia treatment centers, making regular access to care difficult (Peters and Harris, 2018).

In addition to financial and geographic challenges, healthcare policies and insurance structures can complicate access to care. Patients may face delays in receiving treatment due to bureaucratic hurdles, such as approval processes for expensive medications or limited access to specialized healthcare providers. These barriers can lead to gaps in treatment, increasing the risk of bleeding episodes and reducing overall quality of life (Peters and Harris, 2018).

Quality of Life in Hemophilia Patients

Living with hemophilia significantly impacts patients ’quality of life due to the chronic nature of the disease, the physical limitations imposed by frequent bleeds, and the psychological toll of managing a lifelong condition. Studies have shown that patients with hemophilia report lower levels of physical functioning, increased pain, and higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to the general population (Pocoski et al., 2014). Physical limitations often result from joint damage caused by repeated bleeding episodes, which can limit mobility, participation in daily activities, and employment opportunities (Jackson et al., 2015).

In addition to physical health, hemophilia patients often experience psychosocial challenges, including social isolation, dependency on caregivers, and concerns about the future. The need for regular treatment and fear of spontaneous bleeds can create anxiety, particularly in younger patients who may feel restricted in their ability to participate in sports or social activities (Gouw et al., 2007). The financial burden of managing the disease, including the cost of treatment and frequent hospital visits, further exacerbates the stress on patients and their families (Pocoski et al., 2014).

Treatment Side Effects and Patient Adherence

While factor replacement therapy has dramatically improved the life expectancy and quality of life of hemophilia patients, it is not without its side effects. Some patients experience allergic reactions or develop inhibitors, which are antibodies that neutralize the efficacy of the replacement therapy, leading to increased bleeding and more complicated treatment protocols (Srivastava et al., 2013). For patients with inhibitors, alternative treatments such as bypassing agents are used, but these are often more expensive and less effective than standard factor replacement therapies (Cafuir and Kempton, 2017).

The frequency and invasiveness of treatment can also affect adherence. Patients who require regular intravenous infusions may find the treatment regimen burdensome, leading to missed doses and suboptimal outcomes. Research suggests that improving patient education and support systems can help to mitigate these barriers, ensuring that patients adhere to their prescribed treatment regimens and maintain better control over their condition (Gouw et al., 2007).

Gaps in the Literature

While there is substantial quantitative research on the clinical outcomes of hemophilia treatment, there is a relative lack of qualitative studies exploring the lived experiences of patients, particularly with regard to treatment access and quality of life. Many studies focus on treatment efficacy and clinical outcomes but fail to capture the personal, social, and emotional challenges faced by patients in managing their condition. A deeper understanding of these experiences is crucial for developing more patient-centered approaches to hemophilia care, particularly in addressing barriers to treatment access and improving the overall quality of life for patients (Pocoski et al., 2014).

By conducting in-depth interviews with hemophilia patients, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring how treatment access, side effects, and the chronic nature of hemophilia affect their daily lives. Understanding these personal experiences can provide valuable insights for healthcare providers and policymakers to improve care delivery and support for hemophilia patients.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of hemophilia patients, focusing on treatment access, side effects, and quality of life. The study was conducted at Tertiary Hospital. This design was chosen to capture in-depth, personal narratives that quantitative studies may not reveal, allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by patients in managing hemophilia.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of adult hemophilia patients. Eligibility criteria included:

- Diagnosis of hemophilia A or B
- Age 18 years or older
- Currently undergoing treatment (prophylactic or on-demand factor replacement therapy)
- Receiving care at Tertiary Hospital

Patients who had experienced significant side effects from treatment or who had limited access to care were particularly targeted to explore a broad range of experiences. A total of 20 participants were recruited for the study, ensuring variation in demographics (age, severity of hemophilia, and length of treatment).

Recruitment was conducted through a tertiary hospital. Eligible patients were contacted via phone or email by a clinical coordinator and invited to participate in the study. The study was explained to them, and those who expressed interest were scheduled for interviews at a time convenient to them.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted either in person at the hospital or via secure video conferencing for participants who preferred remote participation. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol, which included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences with treatment access, side effects, and the impact of hemophilia on their quality of life.

Key areas of focus during the interviews included:

- Experiences with accessing treatment, including financial and logistical barriers
- Physical and emotional side effects of factor replacement therapy
- Impact of hemophilia on daily life, mobility, mental health, and social relationships
- Coping strategies for managing hemophilia and treatment-related challenges
- Recommendations for improving treatment access and patient support

All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also taken during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and additional context.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data: Researchers listened to the audio recordings and read through the interview transcripts multiple times to become immersed in the data.
2. Generating initial codes: Coding was done manually, with researchers identifying key phrases, concepts, and patterns related to treatment access, quality of life, and side effects.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were grouped into broader themes, such as "treatment access barriers," "impact on physical functioning," and "coping mechanisms."
4. Reviewing themes: Themes were refined and reviewed to ensure they captured the full range of participant experiences.
5. Defining and naming themes: Clear definitions were developed for each theme, ensuring they accurately represented the data.
6. Producing the report: A final thematic map was created, and the themes were written up with supporting quotes from participants.

Researchers used NVivo software to assist with organizing and coding the qualitative data, ensuring thorough and systematic analysis. Themes were compared across participants to identify commonalities and differences in experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee at Tertiary Hospital Name. All participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identity in the transcripts and final report. Audio recordings were stored securely, and only the research team had access to the data.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews revealed three primary themes: Challenges in Treatment Access, Impact on Quality of Life, and Treatment Side Effects. Each theme is supported by sub-themes that offer deeper insight into the experiences of hemophilia patients.

Theme 1: Challenges in Treatment Access

Participants consistently reported challenges in accessing hemophilia treatment, which often influenced their ability to manage the condition effectively. Two key sub-themes emerged: financial barriers and geographic limitations.

Sub-Theme 1.1: Financial Barriers

A significant number of participants highlighted the prohibitive cost of treatment, even for those with insurance coverage. High co-pays, the cost of factor replacement therapy, and ongoing medical expenses were common concerns.

- Participant 3: "The cost of factor therapy is overwhelming. Even with insurance, I still have to pay a lot out of pocket, and sometimes I can’t afford it."
- Participant 9: "I have to choose between paying for treatment or other necessities, which is a terrible situation to be in."

Sub-Theme 1.2: Geographic Limitations
For patients living in rural or remote areas, accessing specialized hemophilia care was a significant barrier. Long distances, lack of transportation, and the absence of local healthcare providers specialized in hemophilia care added to their difficulties.
- Participant 7: "It’s a four-hour drive to get to the nearest clinic. I don’t have the luxury of just scheduling regular appointments when I want."
- Participant 12: "Getting to the hospital is a nightmare. I don’t drive, so I have to rely on others, and that’s not always possible."

Theme 2: Impact on Quality of Life
Hemophilia had a profound impact on patients ’quality of life, affecting both their physical and emotional well-being. Three sub-themes emerged: physical limitations, psychosocial challenges, and financial stress.

Sub-Theme 2.1: PhysicalLimitations
Many participants described chronic pain, reduced mobility, and limitations in daily activities due to joint damage caused by repeated bleeding episodes.
- Participant 4: "My knees are shot from all the bleeds. I can’t even walk without pain, let alone think about any physical activities I used to enjoy."
- Participant 11: "The bleeding has destroyed my joints over time. I’m constantly in pain, and I’ve had to stop working because of it."

Sub-Theme 2.2: Psychosocial Challenges
Living with hemophilia also impacted participants ’mental health. Anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation were common, with participants often feeling disconnected from others who didn’t understand the realities of living with a chronic condition.
- Participant 5: "It’s a constant fear. I never know when I might have a bleed, and that kind of anxiety is exhausting."
- Participant 15: "I feel so isolated sometimes. It’s hard for people around me to understand what it’s like to live with this every day."

Sub-Theme 2.3: Financial Stress
Beyond the physical and emotional burden, financial concerns weighed heavily on participants, many of whom struggled to balance the cost of treatment with everyday living expenses.
- Participant 8: "Managing the cost of treatment is stressful. Every month, it feels like I’m just scraping by, and it’s not like I can skip treatments."
- Participant 16: "I’ve had to make hard choices between paying for my treatment and paying bills. It’s a constant worry."

Theme 3: Treatment Side Effects
Though factor replacement therapy is essential for managing hemophilia, many participants reported experiencing significant side effects. Two sub-themes emerged: joint pain and damage and infusion-related complications.

Sub-Theme 3.1: Joint Pain and Damage
Chronic joint pain, a result of both the disease and repeated factor infusions, was a recurring issue for many participants. This pain not only limited mobility but also reduced their overall quality of life.

- Participant 10: "My joints are a mess from all the bleeds and infusions. It's constant pain, and there's no real relief."
- Participant 19: "Even though the infusions help control the bleeds, they take a toll on my joints. It's a painful trade-off."

Sub-Theme 3.2: Infusion-Related Complications

Repeated infusions posed their own set of challenges. Participants reported issues like difficulty finding veins, painful infusions, and infections at infusion sites.

- Participant 2: "Finding a good vein is tough. Sometimes it takes multiple tries, and it hurts every time."
- Participant 14: "I've had a couple of infections from infusion sites, which makes me hesitant to keep up with the treatments, even though I know I have to."

Discussion

The findings from this study offer important insights into the lived experiences of hemophilia patients, highlighting the challenges they face in accessing treatment, managing the physical and emotional toll of the condition, and dealing with the side effects of their therapies. These results provide a deeper understanding of the barriers to effective care and the ways in which hemophilia impacts quality of life, while also offering guidance on how healthcare systems and providers might improve support for patients.

Treatment Access Challenges

One of the central findings of this study is the difficulty many patients face in accessing hemophilia treatment, with financial barriers and geographic limitations emerging as significant obstacles. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that the high cost of factor replacement therapy, even for insured patients, is a major barrier to receiving consistent care (Peters and Harris, 2018). Participants in this study described struggling with co-payments and out-of-pocket expenses, leading some to delay or skip treatments. This financial strain has serious implications for patient outcomes, as irregular or inadequate treatment can result in increased bleeding episodes, joint damage, and long-term disability (Srivastava et al., 2013).

Additionally, the study highlights the impact of geographic barriers on treatment access, with patients in rural or remote areas facing long travel distances and limited availability of specialized care. This finding aligns with other research that emphasizes the need for more localized healthcare services and telemedicine solutions to improve access for geographically isolated patients (Peters and Harris, 2018). Expanding access to care through telehealth, mobile clinics, or community-based treatment centers could alleviate some of these geographic challenges and ensure more equitable access to treatment.

Impact on Quality of Life

The physical and psychosocial effects of hemophilia on patients 'quality of life were profound. Participants frequently mentioned physical limitations resulting from joint damage, which severely impacted their mobility and ability to engage in everyday activities. This is consistent with previous studies that have documented the high rates of chronic joint pain and reduced mobility among hemophilia patients, particularly as they age (Pocoski et al., 2014). The pain and disability associated with hemophilia not only affect physical health but also limit patients' social participation and employment opportunities, leading to further financial strain.

In addition to the physical burden, mental health challenges were prominent in the narratives of participants, many of whom reported experiencing anxiety, depression, and social isolation. The constant fear of unexpected bleeding episodes and the pressure of managing a chronic condition contributed to significant emotional distress. This aligns with research that indicates higher rates of anxiety and depression in hemophilia patients compared to the general population (Gouw et al., 2007). These findings underscore the need for comprehensive care models that integrate mental health support alongside physical treatment for hemophilia patients. Psychological counseling, peer support groups, and educational programs could help reduce the emotional burden and improve overall well-being.

The financial stress reported by participants further compounded the challenges of living with hemophilia. The cost of treatment, combined with the loss of income due to disability or frequent medical appointments, left many patients feeling overwhelmed by financial worries. This highlights the importance of ensuring that hemophilia treatment is affordable and accessible, potentially through improved insurance coverage, government assistance programs, or patient support initiatives.

Treatment Side Effects

While factor replacement therapy is crucial for managing hemophilia, this study revealed that it also introduces its own set of challenges, particularly regarding joint pain and infusion-related complications. Many participants described worsening joint pain over time, which they attributed to both the disease and the side effects of frequent infusions. Chronic pain remains a significant issue for many hemophilia patients, even when they are receiving regular treatment (Pocoski et al., 2014). This pain often limits their ability to lead active, fulfilling lives and contributes to a cycle of reduced mobility and further joint damage.

Infusion-related issues, such as difficulties finding veins, painful infusion processes, and infections at infusion sites, were also highlighted by participants. These complications can make treatment adherence more difficult and may deter patients from maintaining their recommended treatment regimens. This finding points to the need for improved patient education on infusion techniques, as well as the development of less invasive treatment methods, such as subcutaneous therapies or advances in gene therapy that could reduce the frequency of infusions (Cafuir and Kempton, 2017).

Practical Implications for Healthcare Providers

The findings of this study have several important implications for healthcare providers and policymakers. First, addressing financial and geographic barriers to treatment must be a priority. Healthcare providers should work closely with insurance companies and advocacy organizations to ensure that patients have access to affordable care. Additionally, expanding the use of telemedicine and mobile clinics could make it easier for patients in rural areas to receive the specialized care they need.

Second, improving mental health support for hemophilia patients is essential. Integrating psychological services into routine hemophilia care could help patients cope with the emotional stress of managing a chronic condition. Peer support groups, both in-person and virtual, could also offer valuable social connections for patients who feel isolated by their condition.

Finally, addressing the side effects of treatment, particularly joint pain and infusion complications, is crucial for improving patient outcomes. Healthcare providers should explore ways to minimize the invasiveness of treatment and provide patients with resources to manage the physical discomfort associated with infusions. Emerging treatments, such as gene therapy and non-factor replacement therapies, may offer promising

alternatives that reduce the need for frequent infusions and minimize long-term joint damage (Cafuir and Kempton, 2017).

Strengths and Limitations

This study's strength lies in its qualitative approach, which provides a rich, detailed understanding of hemophilia patients 'lived experiences. By allowing patients to share their personal stories, the study captures the complexity of managing hemophilia beyond what quantitative data alone could reveal.

However, there are limitations to consider. The relatively small sample size and the fact that all participants were recruited from a single tertiary hospital may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include a larger, more diverse sample of hemophilia patients to capture a broader range of experiences. Additionally, this study focused on patients currently receiving treatment, so the experiences of those without access to care may not be fully represented.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant challenges hemophilia patients face in accessing treatment, managing the physical and emotional toll of the condition, and dealing with the side effects of their therapies. Addressing the financial and geographic barriers to care, providing better mental health support, and exploring less invasive treatment options are essential steps in improving the quality of life for hemophilia patients. Future research should continue to explore the lived experiences of this population, with a focus on developing more patient-centered approaches to care.

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