

Definition and Key Concepts of High-Performing Health Systems: A Scoping Review

Research Overview

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About the Research

Health systems across the globe are under increasing pressure, and jurisdictions are actively seeking opportunities to improve and implement high-performing health systems. A collective understanding of what is meant by ‘high performance’ in a health system is important to ensure that improvement initiatives are grounded in evidence and based on shared priorities. This research helps fill a gap in previous literature by offering a comprehensive overview of what constitutes a high-performing health system from a global and broader system-level perspective.

How We Did It

- Searched four research databases and grey literature (i.e., unpublished, non-peer-reviewed) using predetermined search criteria.
- Screened 5721 titles and abstracts and 507 studies for relevancy including 35 primary articles and 47 companion reports (n=82 records).
- Conducted descriptive analysis including study designs examining the performance of health care systems with any population group.
- Charted key concepts from literature on how high performance related to a health system is defined.
- Most records were non-research, such as reports from The Commonwealth Fund and the World Health Organization, and accounted for 75 per cent of resources included in the study.

What We Discovered



Most commonly referenced characteristics

Of the 35 primary articles, 10 articles provided characteristics of a high-performing health system and the following five characteristics were mentioned most often:

- Access
- Quality
- Safety
- Patient centeredness
- Equity



Need for validated tools

Of the eight tools measuring health system performance, only one author identified that the tool was validated.



Lack of a common definition

Only seven records (8%) provided an explicit definition of a high-performing health system. Three different definitions were used, with the **Commonwealth Fund's definition** used most frequently.

Goal of a High-Performing Health System:

“To help everyone, to the extent possible, lead long, healthy and productive lives.”

– The Commonwealth Fund, 2006

Why It Matters

This scoping review highlights a key opportunity to strengthen the foundation for policy and practice by advancing empirical research on clear definitions and shared indicators.

Investing in standardized measures supports consistent evaluation and enables strategic resource allocation, helping policymakers and leaders make data-informed decisions that strengthen trust in the health care system.

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