

Unveiling the Economic Impact of Allied Health Professionals in Pakistan's Healthcare Landscape

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A healthcare system is one of the most critical pillars of any country. The main responsibility of a healthcare system is to guarantee that everyone has access to the best medical facilities in a timely, acceptable, economical, and accessible way. However, in addition to adequate infrastructure and financial stability, qualified human resources are the most important requirement for a healthcare system to operate as such.¹

When individuals in Pakistan think of a career in the medical field, they frequently picture well-known professions like nurse, doctor, and dentist.² Many different specialized healthcare disciplines with highly qualified staff members who offer patient care, are not well-known. These disciplines include healthcare providers collectively termed 'allied health professionals (AHPs)' comprising medical laboratory technologists, radiographers, perfusionists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, behaviour therapists, physical therapists, and dietitians. Numerous new allied health professions are constantly emerging and coming under the allied health umbrella as a result of new techniques and technologies. All these AHPs require specific higher educational qualifications accredited by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) and the Allied Health Professionals Council of Pakistan.

The overall growth of the healthcare sector is made possible by the expansion of AHPs. AHPs are becoming increasingly important in order to provide essential medical services as a result of factors including ageing populations and increasing incidences of chronic diseases. Currently in Pakistan, the level of trainings for these AHPs are as varied as the care they provide and the settings in which they work. These workers include

combination of highly educated individuals and those who have simply received on-the-job training. Their levels of autonomy, reliance on technology, and regulation vary greatly. Health policymakers have not given the allied health workforce as much attention as they have devoted to doctors, nurses, and dentists. Likewise, because AHPs are less well-known than other healthcare professions, prospective college students may not be aware of AHP courses, degree programmes, and potential careers, and they may not even consider them as an option.

Innovative technologies, changing population demographics, and evolving societal demands are fundamentally reshaping the field of allied health. With advancements such as the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital health technologies, along with a growing emphasis on personalized healthcare and community health programmes, these developments are not only revolutionizing the landscape of healthcare provision but also necessitating that allied health professionals acquire new skills and demonstrate adaptability.

The healthcare industry's growing economic significance is also changing the nature of education. Academic health science programmes that can produce a consistent supply of allied health professionals are essential given the industry's expansion. Therefore, an increasing number of institutions and colleges are launching new allied health programmes or growing their current ones. In order to provide graduates with the best possible foundation when they leave the classroom and enter the healthcare industry, several of these programmes are restructuring the traditional teaching methods.

The allied health, together with medicine, and nursing represent the overall patient care workforce. Each member of the workforce brings special skills and knowledge that are needed to deliver high-quality, patient-centered care. The three workforces can be thought of as the three pillars of the patient care workforce, each of which is equally important to the overall stability, effectiveness, and results. In spite of this, Pakistan's health systems tend to ignore the allied health pillar. The underutilized potential of allied health constitutes a significant resource that may be leveraged to tackle the issues confronting our healthcare system presently. Better use of the allied health workforce can improve health outcomes and reduce overall health system costs by reducing demand and utilization of health facilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sharp increase in the demand for AHPs. This was a blessing in disguise as it placed more pressure on the healthcare system but also served to successfully highlight just how essential these allied health services really are.

Like in numerous other countries, Pakistan has a large pool of untapped potential among its allied health personnel, which, with the right management, may greatly enhance healthcare delivery and have an impact on the country's economic growth.

Economic evaluations have shown that growing allied health services, e.g. physical therapy, decreases patient 'length of stay' and reduces medication error, providing large cost savings at the health service and health system levels.³ Moreover, allied health is increasingly supporting medical specialists through advanced roles in a range of settings, such as emergency, outpatient clinics, laboratories, triaging and managing less complex cases requiring conservative management.⁴ A key component of the allied health profession, the clinical laboratory services, can be used efficiently to triage patients to the apposite level of care with a related decrease in costs related to hospitalization.⁵ Clinical laboratory testing can also save costs by lowering the number of patients that need to be treated, lowering medication costs related to identifiable non-responders, preventing costs from anticipated side effects, increasing adherence and persistence, and improving patient outcomes.⁶

The economic impact of AHPs extends beyond the healthcare sector to the broader economy. Their work produces economic value through the provision of services, creation of jobs, and stimulation of consumer

spending, thereby contributing to the overall gross domestic product (GDP) and economic development of the country. Allied health professionals are also involved in research and innovation within their respective disciplines. They enhance patient care protocols, treatment modalities, and healthcare delivery through clinical research and evidence-based practice, which eventually improves patient outcomes and quality of life.

To conclude, AHPs are essential to a nation's economic growth and development. Their contributions go beyond just healthcare provision; they have a significant impact on workforce development, healthcare accessibility, quality improvement, innovation, and ultimately, economic development. By enhancing health outcomes and economic productivity, they contribute significantly to societal well-being, making them indispensable to a nation's growth and development.

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