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TELERADIOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR REDUCING DIAGNOSTIC INEQUALITY: LITERATURE REVIEW OF EVIDENCE FROM RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

Background: In many regions of the world where healthcare resources are limited, access to radiologists and the infrastructure necessary for diagnostic imaging is significantly restricted. The uneven distribution of resources leads to delayed diagnosis and, as a result, poorer treatment outcomes. In response to these challenges, teleradiology enables the remote transmission and interpretation of imaging studies, which can help reduce disparities in access to diagnostic imaging. Such solutions are particularly significant in rural and hard-to-reach areas. Despite the growing trend in the number and scope of telemedicine system implementations, the effectiveness of teleradiology in the context of systematically reducing diagnostic inequalities requires further analysis.

Methods: A comprehensive PubMed and Cochrane Library search was performed using broad terms not specified to subtypes of medical imaging devices, including cohort studies, systematic reviews and meta-analyses from January 2020 to April 2026. Then, the articles were reviewed manually and selected based on the relevance for the review.

Results: The available evidence suggests that the use of teleradiology and artificial intelligence models, in conjunction with mobile imaging systems, can effectively help address the shortage of radiologists, thereby increasing access to diagnostic imaging in healthcare and strengthening screening programs. It also facilitates multidisciplinary collaboration among specialists, leading to more accurate diagnoses and targeted treatment.

Conclusions: In many low-resource regions, limited access to radiologists and diagnostic imaging infrastructure contributes to delayed diagnoses and poorer treatment outcomes. Teleradiology, by enabling remote image interpretation, may help reduce these disparities, particularly in rural and underserved areas. However, its effectiveness in systematically reducing diagnostic inequalities still requires further evaluation.

KEYWORDS

Teleradiology, Health Care Disparities, Diagnostic Imaging, Low-Resource Settings, Artificial Intelligence, Mobile Imaging Systems, Telemedicine, Radiology Workforce Shortage

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1. Introduction

Radiology plays a crucial role in modern clinical medicine, providing essential diagnostic information that significantly contributes to accurate clinical decision-making and improved patient outcomes. Imaging-based diagnostics are often fundamental in disease detection, staging, treatment planning, and monitoring, making radiology an integral component of effective and evidence-based healthcare delivery. Despite its undeniable clinical value, the establishment and maintenance of radiological infrastructure remain resource-intensive. The high costs associated with imaging equipment acquisition, regular servicing and upgrades, as well as the need for highly trained personnel—including radiologic technologists and specialist radiologists—constitute major barriers for many healthcare systems worldwide. These challenges are particularly pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where limited financial and human resources further exacerbate disparities in access to diagnostic services. Evidence from diverse healthcare settings, including India, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, suggests that teleradiology can substantially improve access to timely and accurate diagnostic imaging. By enabling remote interpretation of medical images, teleradiology reduces patient waiting times, enhances clinical decision-making, and supports more efficient use of scarce specialist resources (Chandramohan et al., 2023; Pesapane et al., 2023; Crumley et al., 2020; Adams et al., 2022). Ultimately, these improvements contribute to better coordination of care and have the potential to positively influence overall health outcomes, particularly in underserved and resource-limited regions (Iona Crumley et al., 2020; Rudisill et al., 2024; Nigatu et al., 2025). Teleradiology represents a highly effective solution in settings with limited access to radiological services, particularly in regions where local diagnostic

capacity is insufficient. It enables the transfer of medical images between healthcare facilities, allowing their interpretation by highly qualified specialists who are often concentrated in large urban and academic centers. This centralization of radiological expertise contributes to secondary shortages of specialist services in rural and remote areas, further deepening existing disparities in access to diagnostic care. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI), mobile imaging units, and public–private partnerships further strengthens the scalability, efficiency, and overall impact of teleradiology in resource-constrained healthcare environments (Chandramohan et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2025; Diala et al., 2025). These combined approaches facilitate broader service coverage, improve workflow efficiency, and support more rapid diagnostic decision-making.

Overall, although teleradiology demonstrates substantial potential in reducing global inequalities in access to diagnostic imaging, its full implementation and effectiveness depend on overcoming a range of technical, organizational, and regulatory challenges that continue to limit its widespread adoption.

2. Methods

We conducted a comprehensive literature search using PubMed and the Cochrane Library, supplemented by additional databases, covering publications from January 2020 to April 2026. The search strategy employed broad terms not restricted to specific subtypes of medical imaging devices and included cohort studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. Key search concepts focused on disparities in access to diagnostic services, foundational principles of teleradiology and related terminology (e.g., tele-imaging), as well as alternative and complementary digital health solutions such as tele-ultrasound. Particular attention was also given to literature addressing limitations of teleradiology, as well as barriers to and facilitators of its implementation in clinical practice. Following the initial search, articles were screened manually and assessed for relevance to the scope of the review. Additional sources were identified through citation tracking of the primary studies and included when deemed relevant. A multi-phase filtering process incorporating relevance assessment, methodological quality appraisal, citation graph exploration, and expert review was applied. Ultimately, 52 publications were included in this review.

3. Results

3.1 Impact on Diagnostic Access and Equity

Teleradiology has significantly enhanced access to diagnostic imaging services in underserved areas by allowing remote image interpretation in locations where radiological expertise is unavailable (Chandramohan et al., 2023; Rudisill et al., 2025; Yemeshev et al., 2025; Pesapane et al., 2023). In regions such as India and Africa, the implementation of teleradiology networks has helped reduce disparities between urban and rural healthcare systems through faster reporting times, with average turnaround times ranging from 2 to 4 hours, while also facilitating large-scale population screening initiatives (Chandramohan et al., 2023; Rudisill et al., 2024; Kalyanpur et al., 2022). Similarly, in Ethiopia and Indonesia, the introduction of web-based teleradiology platforms markedly decreased patient waiting times from more than 40 hours to less than 5 hours—and contributed to higher patient satisfaction (Harahap et al., 2024; Nigatu et al., 2025).

3.2 Clinical Outcomes & Decision-Making

Research conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo demonstrated that the introduction of computed radiography combined with teleradiology resulted in changes to diagnoses in 62% of patients and modifications to treatment plans in 61%, ultimately improving clinical decision-making and patient management (Crumley et al., 2020). Comparable outcomes have also been documented in Malawi (tuberculosis screening), Peru (tele-ultrasound diagnostics), Mali (national teleradiology network), Ghana and Kenya (mobile teleradiology services), Saudi Arabia (remote MRI interpretation), Germany (enhanced rural healthcare access), Australia (breast cancer evaluation), Canada (remote ultrasound services), China (robotic tele-ultrasound), and India (the Tripura telemedicine model) (Rudisill et al., 2024; Marini et al., 2021; Toscano et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2022; Marini et al., 2021; Kalyanpur et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2023; Reschke et al., 2025; Johnston et al., 2020).

3.3 Quantitative outcomes of teleradiology in underserved settings

In low-resource and rural settings, teleradiology has consistently improved turnaround times (TAT), supported more accurate diagnostic decision-making, and increased patient satisfaction, often on a large scale.

Clinical impact and diagnostic performance:

- Africa network: 58,223 scans from 39,513 patients in 8 countries; mean TAT 2.46 h (95% CI 2.44–2.48) (Rudisill et al., 2024).
- Tripura, India: 78,622 studies over 3 years from 26 rural centers; mean TAT 3.19 h (95% CI 3.16–3.22) (Kalyanpur et al., 2022).
- Saudi Arabia: 103,730 scans over 10 years; mean TAT 19.48 h (95% CI 19.39–19.56) (Arjuna et al., 2025).

Patient and provider satisfaction:

- Ethiopia: satisfaction median score rose from 96 to 113 (out of 155); % scale mean from 52.6% to 65.7%; GLM showed 11% increase in satisfaction (Nigatu et al., 2025).
- Rural India (Gondia): 81.7% of patients satisfied/very satisfied; 76.7% of physicians said reports directly guided immediate management, 18.3% referral decisions (Turkat et al., 2020).
- North Sumatra: high perceived usefulness and ease of use among 75 providers; TAM scales Cronbach's alpha >0.85 (Harahap et al., 2024).

3.4 Implementation Models & Innovations

Public–private partnerships (PPPs) have played a significant role in expanding teleradiology services across different regions of India by implementing diverse outsourcing strategies. These initiatives have enhanced cost-efficiency, diagnostic precision, patient satisfaction, and the overall sustainability of healthcare delivery systems (Sharma et al., 2025). Moreover, the incorporation of artificial intelligence–based solutions has improved both workflow efficiency and diagnostic performance (Chandramohan et al., 2023; Diala et al., 2025). The use of mobile digital imaging systems and tele-ultrasound technologies has also enabled access to diagnostic services in remote and underserved areas while requiring only limited infrastructure (Adams et al., 2022; Britton et al., 2019).

3.5 Barriers & Facilitators

The main obstacles to successful implementation include inadequate infrastructure, particularly unreliable internet access and electricity supply, shortages of trained personnel and technical support staff, unclear regulations related to data security and patient confidentiality, limited financial resources, and resistance from healthcare professionals and administrators. Additional challenges involve difficulties integrating teleradiology into existing clinical workflows, language and cultural differences, concerns regarding quality assurance, and maintaining long-term sustainability (Chandramohan et al., 2023; Nigatu et al., 2024; Ewing et al., 2022).

Factors that support successful implementation include effective clinical governance and committed leadership, strong collaboration and communication among healthcare teams, reliable technical assistance, intuitive and accessible IT systems, comprehensive training initiatives, and active community involvement. Other important facilitators are centralized consultation hubs, cooperation between the public and private sectors, supportive healthcare policies, incentive systems for radiologists and technicians, and the development of scalable and sustainable operational models (Sharma et al., 2025; Nigatu et al., 2024; Johnston et al., 2020).

4. Discussion

Current evidence strongly indicates that teleradiology is an effective approach for reducing disparities in diagnostic healthcare within resource-limited settings, primarily by increasing access to specialist image interpretation in areas affected by severe radiologist shortages (Chandramohan et al., 2023; Pesapane et al., 2023; Crumley et al., 2020; Adams et al., 2022). Its benefits are particularly significant when integrated with advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence–based diagnostic tools, mobile imaging systems (Chandramohan et al., 2023), or scalable public–private partnership models that improve the allocation of resources across healthcare sectors. In addition, teleradiology promotes multidisciplinary cooperation among healthcare professionals, thereby supporting more comprehensive and patient-centered management of complex conditions, including breast cancer and musculoskeletal disorders (Pesapane et al., 2023; Yemeshev et al., 2025).

Despite these advantages, several important barriers continue to hinder broader implementation. Limited infrastructure, including inadequate internet connectivity and unstable power supplies, restricts scalability and long-term sustainability. Regulatory systems governing data protection and patient confidentiality are often underdeveloped or inconsistently applied. Workforce shortages remain a major concern even with technological support, while quality assurance standards still require refinement, particularly in complicated cases that demand multidisciplinary consultation or real-time specialist input (Chandramohan et al., 2023; Nigatu et al., 2024). Furthermore, insufficiently inclusive implementation strategies may widen existing digital inequalities if issues related to access, training, and technological literacy are not adequately addressed.

The overall quality of available evidence is generally moderate to high for studies evaluating feasibility and short-term effectiveness. However, there is a relative lack of robust long-term outcome studies and randomized controlled trials, underscoring the need for more rigorous and standardized evaluation frameworks in future research.

5. Conclusions

Teleradiology has been widely recognized as an effective approach to narrowing diagnostic disparities by extending access to specialist imaging interpretation in healthcare systems with limited resources. It contributes to more timely and accurate diagnoses, strengthens clinical decision-making, and helps reduce inequities between urban and rural populations. At the same time, its full implementation depends on addressing ongoing challenges related to infrastructure, regulation, and workforce capacity, as well as producing stronger evidence on its long-term clinical and system-level outcomes.

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