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Care Management for Neurological Sequelae in Brazil's Unified Health System: Strategies for Comprehensive Rehabilitation

Juliana Aparecida Pereira Ribeiro
Doutoranda em Saúde Pública
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Gabriela Eiras Ortoni
Doutoranda em Saúde Pública
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Mônica Rodrigues da Silva
Doutorado em atenção à saúde
Universidad Federal de Uberlândia, Brasil

Wenderson Gonçalves Andrade
Enfermeiro

Janayna de Oliveira Silva
Doutoranda em Saúde Pública
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Mônica Alessandra Dias Rocha
Doutoranda em Saúde Pública
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Regina Gabriela Caldas de Moraes
Doutoranda em Saúde Pública
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Oldair Donizete Galeni
Doutorando em Saúde Pública
Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales, Argentina

Abstract

Neurological sequelae resulting from stroke, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, neurodegenerative disorders, and other neurological conditions have become a major challenge for healthcare systems due to their long-term impact on functionality, autonomy, and quality of life. In Brazil's Unified Health System (SUS), comprehensive rehabilitation requires coordinated care management capable of integrating different levels of healthcare while ensuring continuity, equity, and patient-centered interventions. This academic essay discusses the theoretical foundations of care management in neurological rehabilitation, examines organizational and structural barriers affecting integrated care, and analyzes strategies capable of strengthening comprehensive rehabilitation within SUS. The discussion is supported by contemporary scientific evidence and public health policies,

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emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration, care coordination, rehabilitation networks, digital health, and health governance. The essay argues that strengthening care management is essential for improving functional outcomes, reducing health inequalities, optimizing healthcare resources, and consolidating comprehensive rehabilitation as a strategic component of universal public healthcare systems.

Keywords: Care Management; Health Services Accessibility; Neurological Rehabilitation; Public Health; Unified Health System.

Introduction

Neurological disorders represent one of the leading causes of disability worldwide, generating substantial individual, social, and economic consequences. Advances in emergency medicine, intensive care, and diagnostic technologies have significantly reduced mortality rates associated with neurological diseases. Consequently, health systems increasingly face the challenge of providing long-term rehabilitation capable of restoring functionality, promoting autonomy, and improving quality of life for individuals living with permanent neurological sequelae.

Neurological rehabilitation encompasses much more than the recovery of motor function. Individuals affected by stroke, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, and other neurological disorders frequently experience cognitive, behavioral, emotional, communicative, and psychosocial impairments. These multidimensional consequences require comprehensive interventions that integrate biological, psychological, and social dimensions of health rather than focusing exclusively on disease-specific treatment.

The Brazilian Unified Health System (Sistema Único de Saúde—SUS) was established upon the constitutional principles of universality, comprehensiveness, and equity, recognizing health as a fundamental social right. Within this framework, rehabilitation services constitute an essential component of comprehensive healthcare by promoting functional recovery, social inclusion, and long-term support for individuals with disabilities. Nevertheless, important disparities persist regarding access to specialized rehabilitation services across different regions of the country.

Care management has progressively emerged as a strategic concept for organizing healthcare delivery in complex clinical conditions. Rather than limiting healthcare to isolated interventions, care management seeks to coordinate multidisciplinary actions, optimize communication among professionals, strengthen continuity of care, and ensure that therapeutic decisions remain centered on patients' individual needs. This perspective aligns with contemporary healthcare models that prioritize integrated and value-based care.

The growing burden of chronic neurological conditions has intensified the need for healthcare models capable of integrating primary healthcare, specialized rehabilitation centers, hospital services, community support, and social protection programs. Fragmented healthcare pathways frequently result in delayed rehabilitation, duplicated services, inefficient resource allocation, and poorer functional outcomes. Consequently,

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strengthening integrated rehabilitation networks has become a strategic priority for public healthcare systems worldwide.

Considering these challenges, this academic essay discusses the role of care management in the rehabilitation of neurological sequelae within Brazil's Unified Health System. The manuscript examines theoretical perspectives regarding comprehensive rehabilitation, analyzes organizational challenges affecting integrated neurological care, and explores innovative strategies capable of strengthening rehabilitation networks while reinforcing the constitutional principles that sustain SUS.

Methodology

This study is characterized as a theoretical academic essay developed through critical and reflective analysis of contemporary scientific knowledge concerning care management and neurological rehabilitation. Unlike empirical investigations, academic essays seek to articulate concepts, theories, public policies, and scientific evidence to promote analytical interpretation of complex phenomena, contributing to theoretical advancement and critical debate within a specific field of knowledge.

The discussion was constructed through the integration of national and international literature addressing neurological rehabilitation, integrated healthcare, health services organization, interdisciplinary practice, care coordination, health governance, and public health policies. Official institutional documents concerning rehabilitation and healthcare organization were also considered to contextualize contemporary recommendations applicable to universal healthcare systems, particularly the Brazilian Unified Health System.

The argumentative structure follows the principles of scientific rigor, theoretical coherence, and critical synthesis that characterize academic essays in the health sciences. Rather than presenting original empirical findings, the manuscript develops an interpretative discussion supported by consolidated scientific evidence and recognized theoretical frameworks. In accordance with the adopted editorial structure, all bibliographic references supporting the discussion are presented exclusively in the final section of the manuscript, following the standards of the American Psychological Association (APA, 7th edition).

Development

1. Theoretical Foundations of Care Management in Comprehensive Neurological Rehabilitation

The concept of care management has evolved considerably over recent decades, shifting from administrative coordination toward a broader perspective that encompasses clinical decision-making, organizational integration, interdisciplinary collaboration, and patient-centered care. Within rehabilitation, this evolution reflects the growing recognition that complex neurological conditions cannot be effectively managed through isolated

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professional interventions but instead require coordinated healthcare pathways capable of responding to changing clinical and social needs.

Neurological rehabilitation represents one of the most complex areas of healthcare because neurological injuries frequently affect multiple dimensions of human functioning simultaneously. Motor impairment, cognitive decline, communication disorders, emotional instability, chronic pain, and social participation restrictions often coexist, demanding therapeutic approaches that extend beyond traditional biomedical paradigms. Consequently, rehabilitation has progressively adopted biopsychosocial models that recognize disability as the result of dynamic interactions between health conditions and environmental factors.

The biopsychosocial perspective has become fundamental for understanding neurological rehabilitation because it expands the focus from impairment correction to the promotion of functionality and participation. According to this approach, successful rehabilitation is not measured exclusively by clinical improvement but also by the individual's ability to perform daily activities, maintain social relationships, return to productive roles, and achieve greater independence within their social environment.

Within this context, care management functions as an organizational strategy capable of connecting different dimensions of rehabilitation. It involves planning, monitoring, evaluating, and adapting interventions according to individual trajectories, ensuring that healthcare actions are not fragmented across services and professionals. For people with neurological sequelae, continuity of care is particularly relevant because rehabilitation needs frequently change over time, requiring dynamic therapeutic adjustments.

Interdisciplinary collaboration represents another essential component of effective care management. Neurological rehabilitation commonly involves physicians, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, psychologists, social workers, nutritionists, and other professionals. However, the presence of multiple professionals alone does not guarantee comprehensive care. Integration depends on communication mechanisms, shared clinical objectives, collaborative decision-making, and recognition of the complementary roles of each professional involved.

The organization of rehabilitation around patient-centered care has also transformed traditional healthcare models. Historically, rehabilitation services were frequently structured according to professional specialties rather than patients' needs, resulting in fragmented pathways and difficulties in navigating healthcare systems. Care management proposes a different logic, in which services are organized around individuals' functional goals, life contexts, and expectations regarding recovery and social participation.

In public health systems, care management also represents an instrument for promoting equity. Neurological sequelae disproportionately affect vulnerable populations due to differences in access to early diagnosis, rehabilitation technologies, transportation, socioeconomic conditions, and availability of specialized services. Therefore, effective

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management strategies must consider social determinants of health and develop mechanisms capable of reducing inequalities in rehabilitation access and outcomes.

The Brazilian experience with SUS demonstrates the importance of organizing healthcare through coordinated networks rather than isolated services. The establishment of the Care Network for People with Disabilities (Rede de Cuidados à Pessoa com Deficiência) represented an important advancement by recognizing rehabilitation as an essential component of comprehensive healthcare. Nevertheless, implementation challenges remain, particularly regarding regional inequalities, communication between care levels, and continuity after hospital discharge.

Another important theoretical dimension concerns the relationship between care management and health governance. Managing neurological rehabilitation requires not only clinical coordination but also strategic planning, allocation of resources, evaluation of outcomes, and development of policies capable of responding to population needs. Thus, care management operates at the intersection between individual assistance and broader health system organization.

Therefore, comprehensive neurological rehabilitation within SUS depends on integrating clinical knowledge, organizational strategies, and social perspectives. Care management provides a theoretical and operational framework capable of overcoming fragmented healthcare approaches by promoting continuity, interdisciplinarity, equity, and person-centered practices. Strengthening this approach represents a fundamental pathway for improving rehabilitation outcomes and ensuring that individuals living with neurological sequelae receive coordinated and comprehensive care throughout their lives.

2. Challenges to Integrated Rehabilitation within the Brazilian Unified Health System

The implementation of comprehensive neurological rehabilitation within SUS faces multiple challenges related to healthcare organization, regional inequalities, workforce distribution, and coordination among different levels of care. Although Brazil has developed important policies aimed at expanding rehabilitation access, the complexity of neurological conditions frequently exposes limitations in the capacity of health services to provide continuous and integrated care.

One of the main challenges concerns fragmentation between healthcare levels. Individuals with neurological sequelae often transition between hospitals, outpatient rehabilitation services, primary healthcare units, and community resources. However, insufficient communication between these sectors may compromise continuity, resulting in discontinuity of therapeutic plans, repeated assessments, and loss of important clinical information during transitions of care.

Primary Health Care (PHC) plays a central role in coordinating healthcare pathways within SUS, but its participation in neurological rehabilitation remains uneven. Although PHC professionals are essential for monitoring long-term functional outcomes, preventing

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complications, and supporting families, many teams face limitations related to specialized knowledge, workload, availability of rehabilitation professionals, and access to referral and counter-referral mechanisms.

The regional distribution of rehabilitation services represents another significant barrier. Brazil's continental dimensions generate substantial differences in healthcare availability between urban and rural areas, as well as between economically developed and less developed regions. Specialized rehabilitation centers are often concentrated in metropolitan areas, creating geographical barriers that disproportionately affect individuals with disabilities who frequently experience mobility limitations and socioeconomic vulnerability.

The shortage and unequal distribution of specialized professionals further complicate comprehensive neurological rehabilitation. Although Brazil has a large healthcare workforce, the availability of professionals trained specifically in neurological rehabilitation varies considerably across regions. This scenario may limit access to evidence-based interventions and compromise the implementation of multidisciplinary rehabilitation programs.

Another relevant challenge involves the transition from hospital-based care to community-based rehabilitation. Following acute neurological events, many individuals require immediate rehabilitation interventions to maximize functional recovery and prevent secondary complications. However, insufficient coordination between hospital discharge planning and outpatient services may create gaps during one of the most critical phases of rehabilitation.

Family involvement also represents a complex component of neurological rehabilitation management. Families frequently assume essential caregiving responsibilities, particularly when individuals experience severe functional limitations. Nevertheless, caregivers may face emotional, financial, and social burdens due to insufficient professional support, inadequate preparation, and limited access to educational resources regarding long-term care.

The evaluation of rehabilitation outcomes constitutes another challenge for healthcare management. Traditional health indicators frequently emphasize mortality, hospitalization rates, and disease control, while rehabilitation requires broader measures related to functionality, independence, participation, and quality of life. Developing appropriate evaluation systems is essential for assessing the effectiveness of rehabilitation networks and guiding health policies.

Technological inequalities also influence access to modern rehabilitation strategies. Digital health tools, tele-rehabilitation, remote monitoring systems, and assistive technologies have expanded possibilities for improving continuity of care. However, unequal access to internet connectivity, digital literacy, and technological infrastructure may reproduce existing health inequalities if implementation strategies do not consider social vulnerability.

Another important challenge involves the financing and sustainability of rehabilitation services within SUS. Comprehensive neurological rehabilitation frequently requires

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prolonged interventions, specialized equipment, assistive technologies, and continuous professional support. However, healthcare financing models traditionally prioritize acute interventions and episodic care, creating difficulties in maintaining long-term rehabilitation programs. Strengthening financial mechanisms that recognize rehabilitation as an essential component of chronic care management is therefore necessary to ensure service continuity.

The organization of rehabilitation pathways also depends on effective referral and counter-referral systems. In many healthcare contexts, including SUS, weaknesses in communication between primary care, specialized services, and hospital sectors may result in inefficient patient trajectories. Without clearly defined care pathways, individuals with neurological sequelae may experience delays in accessing appropriate interventions, reducing opportunities for functional improvement and increasing dependence on informal caregivers.

Health professionals' education represents another structural challenge. Neurological rehabilitation requires competencies that combine clinical expertise, interdisciplinary communication, ethical decision-making, and understanding of social determinants of health. However, undergraduate and continuing education programs do not always adequately prepare professionals to work within integrated rehabilitation models, limiting the implementation of comprehensive care approaches.

The cultural transformation required for integrated care should also be considered. Healthcare organizations historically operate according to hierarchical and specialized structures, where professional autonomy may prevail over collaborative practices. Moving toward care management requires changes in organizational culture, encouraging shared responsibility, collective planning, and recognition that rehabilitation outcomes depend on coordinated actions rather than isolated professional performance.

Furthermore, disability-related stigma continues to influence healthcare experiences and social participation. Individuals living with neurological sequelae may encounter barriers not only within health services but also in educational, occupational, and community environments. Therefore, rehabilitation management should incorporate strategies aimed at social inclusion, accessibility, and empowerment, recognizing individuals with disabilities as active participants in healthcare decisions.

The complexity of neurological rehabilitation also requires stronger articulation between health policies and social protection systems. Functional limitations often affect employment, income, housing, transportation, and family dynamics. Consequently, healthcare interventions alone may be insufficient to guarantee comprehensive rehabilitation. Effective management requires intersectoral approaches involving education, social assistance, labor policies, and community resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in rehabilitation systems worldwide. Restrictions on face-to-face services, interruption of therapeutic programs, and increased demand among individuals recovering from severe infections demonstrated the

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fragility of rehabilitation networks. At the same time, the pandemic accelerated discussions regarding tele-rehabilitation, remote monitoring, and digital solutions as complementary strategies for maintaining continuity of care.

Despite these challenges, SUS possesses important structural strengths that can support advances in neurological rehabilitation. The existence of universal coverage, organized healthcare networks, community-based primary care, and policies directed toward people with disabilities provides a foundation for developing more integrated models. The challenge lies in transforming these principles into operational practices capable of reaching populations equitably.

3. Strategies for Strengthening Comprehensive Neurological Care through Care Management

Strengthening neurological rehabilitation within SUS requires a paradigm shift from fragmented service delivery toward integrated models centered on individuals' functional needs. This transformation involves reorganizing healthcare processes, improving coordination mechanisms, and adopting management strategies capable of connecting different services throughout the rehabilitation trajectory. Comprehensive care should be understood not as the simple availability of multiple interventions, but as the capacity of the health system to provide coordinated responses according to each person's circumstances.

One fundamental strategy involves strengthening care coordination mechanisms. Care coordinators or reference professionals can facilitate communication between healthcare levels, monitor rehabilitation goals, support transitions between services, and ensure that therapeutic plans remain aligned with patients' needs. This approach is particularly relevant for neurological conditions, where rehabilitation trajectories are prolonged and frequently require adjustments according to functional evolution.

The expansion of interdisciplinary rehabilitation teams represents another essential strategy. Effective neurological rehabilitation depends on collaborative work among professionals with complementary expertise. However, interdisciplinarity requires more than the coexistence of different professional categories. It demands shared clinical objectives, regular communication, joint decision-making, and organizational environments that value collaborative practices.

The integration of rehabilitation into Primary Health Care should also be strengthened. PHC teams occupy a privileged position for monitoring individuals within their communities, identifying rehabilitation needs early, preventing complications, and supporting family caregivers. Expanding rehabilitation competencies within PHC can reduce unnecessary referrals, improve continuity of care, and promote a more equitable distribution of healthcare resources.

Another important strategy involves the development of individualized rehabilitation plans. Neurological sequelae affect individuals differently depending on clinical conditions, social

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context, personal expectations, and available support systems. Therefore, standardized approaches should be complemented by personalized care planning that establishes realistic goals, considers patients' preferences, and evaluates progress through meaningful functional outcomes.

Digital health technologies represent a promising opportunity for improving rehabilitation management. Tele-rehabilitation, electronic health records, remote monitoring platforms, and digital communication between professionals may facilitate continuity of care, particularly for individuals living in geographically distant areas. Nevertheless, technological implementation must be accompanied by policies addressing digital inclusion and equitable access.

Health information systems also require improvement to support evidence-based management. Reliable data regarding rehabilitation demand, service availability, patient outcomes, and regional inequalities are essential for planning and evaluating healthcare policies. Developing indicators focused on functionality and quality of life can complement traditional epidemiological measures and provide a more comprehensive assessment of rehabilitation effectiveness.

Community-based rehabilitation approaches should be incorporated as complementary strategies within SUS. These approaches recognize that rehabilitation extends beyond clinical environments and involves families, communities, and social participation. By promoting accessibility, autonomy, and inclusion, community-based initiatives contribute to reducing disability-related inequalities and strengthening social support networks.

Professional training and continuing education should be considered strategic investments for improving rehabilitation quality. Educational initiatives focused on interdisciplinary care, disability rights, health management, and evidence-based rehabilitation can enhance workforce capacity and support organizational transformation. Developing professionals prepared to work within integrated networks is essential for consolidating comprehensive care models.

Finally, strengthening neurological rehabilitation requires political commitment and governance strategies capable of ensuring sustainability. Policies must recognize rehabilitation as a long-term investment rather than an isolated healthcare expense. By integrating care management principles into SUS planning, Brazil can advance toward a rehabilitation model that combines clinical effectiveness, social inclusion, and equity.

Conclusion

Comprehensive management of neurological sequelae represents a major challenge for contemporary health systems, particularly within universal healthcare models such as Brazil's Unified Health System. The complexity of neurological disabilities requires approaches that move beyond fragmented clinical interventions toward integrated strategies based on continuity of care, interdisciplinary collaboration, equity, and patient-centered

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rehabilitation. In this context, care management emerges as a fundamental framework capable of connecting healthcare services, professionals, individuals, families, and communities, strengthening the effectiveness of rehabilitation pathways.

The consolidation of comprehensive neurological rehabilitation within SUS depends on organizational innovation, investment in rehabilitation networks, qualification of health professionals, improved coordination mechanisms, and recognition of functionality and social participation as central health outcomes. By incorporating care management principles into health planning and service delivery, SUS can reinforce its commitment to universal, equitable, and comprehensive care, ensuring that individuals living with neurological sequelae receive not only therapeutic interventions but also opportunities for autonomy, dignity, and full participation in society.

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