HEALTH EQUITY FRAMEWORKS – HEALTHCARE SYSTEM ACTIONS AND PRIORITIES

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INTRODUCTION

- Health equity is defined as the attainment of the highest level of health for all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, geography, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, socioeconomic status, or other factors that may affect access to care, healthcare delivery, and health outcomes[1]
- In the US, there have been increased efforts at the federal level to advance health equity
  – In 2021 and 2023, President Biden issued Executive Orders 13985 and 14091 which defined equity, directed federal funding to underserved communities, and supported the implementation of equity strategies among other actions[2]
  – Government organizations, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), have created strategic guides on how to further health equity efforts in the US[1,3]
- While there is alignment on the need for health equity and progress towards implementation of programs, there are currently no standardized metrics for assessing health equity, including both health equity-related advances or barriers[4]

OBJECTIVES

- The objective of this research was to evaluate health equity frameworks currently used by payer and hospital organizations

METHODS

- Targeted literature searches were conducted in Embase, PubMed, Google, and Google Scholar to identify papers evaluating health equity frameworks
- Searches were supplemented with information from payer and hospital organizations, including annual reports, frameworks, and guidelines
- Key search terms included, but were not limited to, "diversity," "health equity," "guidelines," "health systems and/or hospitals," "payers," and other similar terms

RESULTS

Figure 1 | Trends Over Time for Health Equity Literature on US Health Systems

Published Literature on Health Equity in the US (2012-2022)
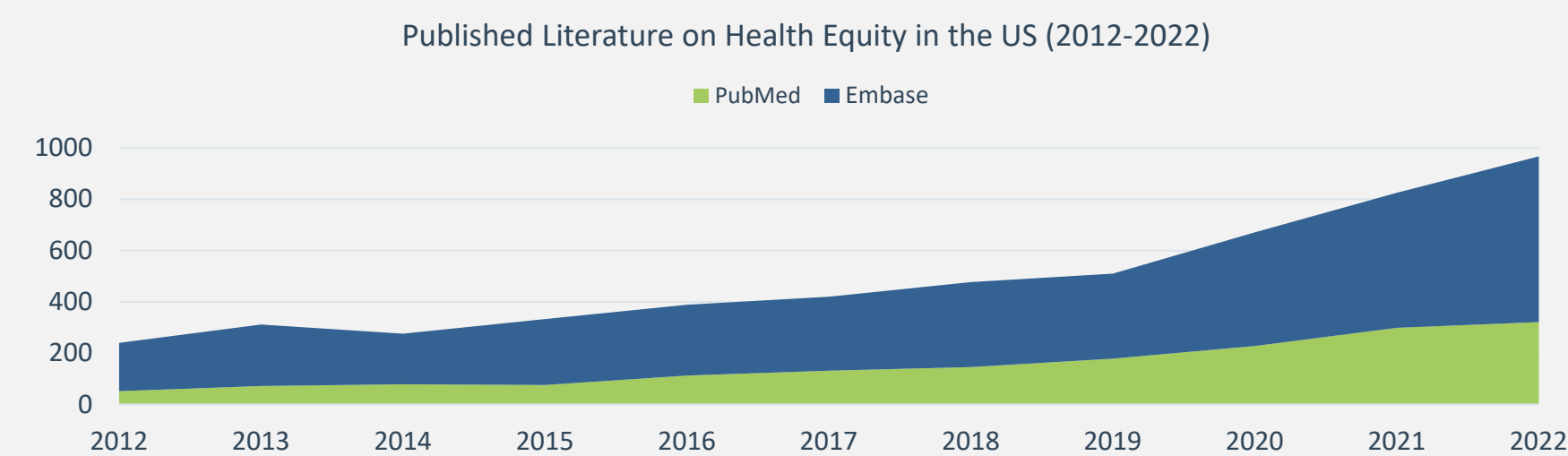
- Between 2012 and 2022, the amount of published literature focused on health equity within the context of US health systems and healthcare has more than doubled and continues to trend upwards
- This search was limited to Embase and PubMed and included terms focused on health equity (e.g., health equity, parity, inequality, health disparities, etc.) and health care settings (e.g., hospitals, health care organizations, managed care organizations, etc.)

Figure 2 | Existing Health Equity Frameworks

- CMS and AHA are the largest payer and hospital group in the US that have developed their own health equity frameworks: CMS Framework for Health Equity Priorities and AHA Health Equity Roadmap, respectively (**Figure 2**)
  – These health equity frameworks are comprehensive and have a few common strategies (**Figure 2**)
- Outside of CMS and AHA, a few third-party groups have also developed health equity frameworks, including the Joint Commission (JCO), the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA), National Quality Forum (NQF), the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI)[4]
  – Across all 5 of these organizations, data collection, community collaborations, and organization-wide equity were the most common measures for advancing health equity[4]

CMS Framework for Health Equity Priorities[1]:
- Expand the collection, reporting, and analysis of standardized data
- Assess causes of disparities within CMS programs, and address inequities in policies and operations to close gaps
- Build the capacity of healthcare organizations and the workforce to reduce health and healthcare disparities
- Advance language access, health literacy, and the provision of culturally tailored services
- Increase all forms of accessibility to healthcare services and coverage

AHA Health Equity Roadmap[5]:
- Create equitable and inclusive organizational policies
- Collect and use data to drive action
- Increase diverse representation in leadership and governance
- Establish community collaboration for solutions
- Implement systemic and shared accountability
- Provide culturally appropriate patient care

Commonalities between the CMS and AHA Frameworks:
- Expand the collection and use of standardized data
- Implement equitable and inclusive policies
- Support culturally appropriate patient care and services
- Build a diverse workforce

} These commonalities are also shared by the JCO, NCQA, NQF, RWJF, and IHI
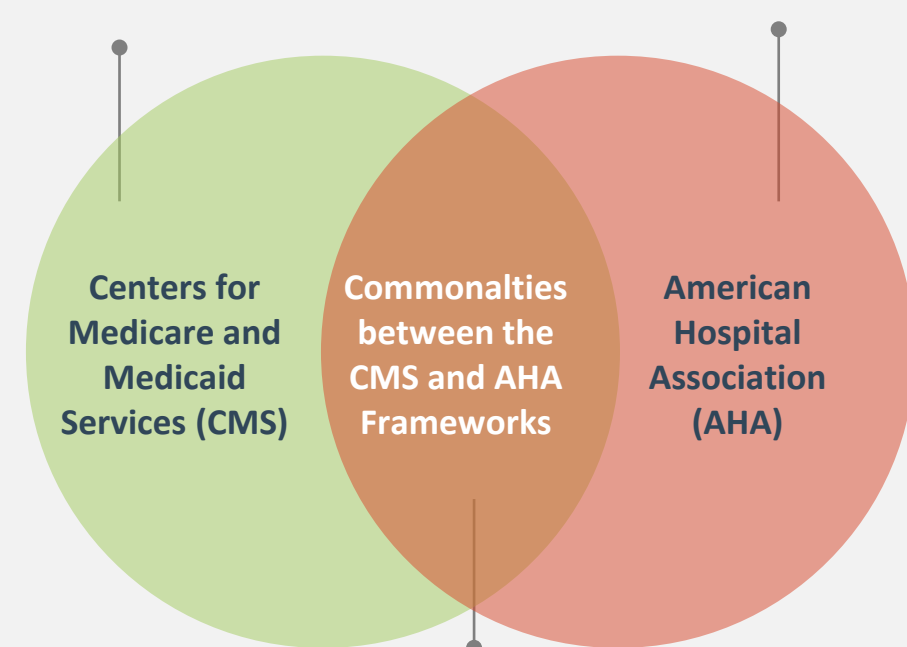
Table 1 | Healthy Equity Initiatives and Frameworks at the Top 10 Largest US Health Systems[6-12]

Health System Name	Mission Statement Focused on Health Equity	Publicly Available Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Annual Report	Health Equity Initiatives	Health Equity Frameworks
Trinity Health[7]	✓	✓	✓	✓
HCA Healthcare[8]	✓	✓	✓	✗
Providence Health & Services[9]	✓	✗	✓	✗
Ascension Health[10]	✓	✗	✗	✗
CommonSpirit[11]	✓	✗	✗	✗
Community Health Systems[12]	✓	✗	✗	✗
Encompass Health[13]	✗	✓	✗	✗
Select Medical Corporation[6]	✗	✗	✗	✗
Scion Health[6]	✗	✗	✗	✗
Tenet Healthcare[6]	✗	✗	✗	✗

- Among the 10 largest health systems in the US, 60% have mission statements that directly mention health equity and 30% have publicly available DEI reports and established health equity initiatives. However, 90% do not have a framework to assess health equity, and 60% do not have any active initiatives targeted toward advancing health equity
- Four of these hospital systems do not have public-facing mission statements or public pledges on advancing health equity
- Health equity initiatives were defined as measures enacted to either advance health equity or reduce health inequality outside of establishing foundations or grants
  – Examples of health equity initiatives included implementing standardized data collection, establishing or engaging community stakeholders, and creating a Vaccine Equity Team to study vaccination barriers in local vulnerable populations and create a targeted solution[7-10]
- Among the 10 health systems sampled, Trinity Health (not affiliated with Trinity Life Sciences) is the only one that utilizes a health equity framework, specifically the AHA Health Equity Roadmap; however, this framework is only being utilized in one subsidiary (St. Mary's Health Care System)

Table 2 | Healthy Equity Initiatives and Frameworks at the Top 10 Largest US Insurance Companies[14]

Insurance Company Name	Mission Statement Focused on Health Equity	Publicly Available Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Annual Report	Health Equity Initiatives	Health Equity Frameworks
CVS Health[15]	✓	✓	✓	✗
Cigna[16]	✓	✓	✓	✗
Kaiser Permanente[17]	✓	✓	✓	✗
Humana[18]	✓	✓	✗	✗
UnitedHealth Group[19]	✓	✗	✓	✗
Anthem[20]	✓	✗	✓	✗
Centene[21]	✗	✓	✓	✗
HCSC[22]	✗	✓	✗	✗
GuideWell[23]	✗	✓	✗	✗
Molina Healthcare[24]	✗	✓	✗	✗

- Among the 10 largest payers in the US, 60% have mission statements that directly mention health equity, 80% have publicly available DEI reports, and 60% have established health equity initiatives
- All publicly available DEI reports from payers sampled in this study were focused on supplier and workforce diversity, with few discussing patients served and even fewer mentioning health equity initiatives
- Health equity frameworks are a tangible way for hospitals and health systems to assess the effectiveness of their policies and ensure that their actions and outcomes are reflective of their mission statements towards health equity; however, none of the top 10 largest payers in the US appear to have public-facing dedicated health equity frameworks

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

- Although the volume of publications on health equity in the US has increased over the last decade, there are few health equity frameworks among the largest health systems and payers
- When comparing health systems to payers, payers have more publicly available DEI reports and health equity initiatives; health systems have fewer DEI reports, initiatives, and frameworks, which are essential for measuring impact and putting goal-oriented actions into practice
- Based on the overlap observed among existing health equity frameworks, several core pillars of health equity frameworks include:
  – Expanding and standardizing data collection (e.g., individual-level demographics, socioeconomic status, social risk factors)
  – Culturally appropriate care and services (e.g., materials in multiple languages, culturally relevant toolkits)
  – Equitable and inclusive policies (e.g., creating a health equity mission statement)
  – Diverse and culturally competent workforce (e.g., community-based interventions)
- A mission statement, publicly available DEI report, and publicly available initiatives may be helpful measures to keep health systems and payers accountable, but health equity frameworks allow for the assessment of the effectiveness of health equity programs

Limitations

- This report focused on publicly available health equity frameworks developed by health systems, payers, and select third-party organizations
- The health systems and payers featured in this report are a sample of the total US healthcare landscape
- Additionally, some of the health systems and payers assessed in this report may have non-publicly available DEI reports that were not accessible

Conclusion

- Although many health systems have health equity-focused mission statements and/or publicly available DEI annual reports, few have dedicated initiatives and even fewer have health equity centered frameworks that measure these initiatives, demonstrating an unmet need for more robust measures to assess the impact of these initiatives and goals to inform decision making
- The lack of having a health equity framework in place makes it difficult for organizations such as payers to assess the success, failure, or overall value of their health equity initiatives; it is also more challenging for the public to hold them accountable for any pledges they may have publicly made toward health equity
- Further research is required to assess the extent to which the implementation of health equity frameworks impacts health disparities and real-world patient outcomes

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