ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Journal of Global Medical Education and Research
Volume 8 Number 2, July - December 2025

Collaborative Care Models for Sickle Cell and Mental Health Management

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Sagar Bayaskar. Collaborative Care Models for Sickle Cell and Mental Health Management. Jr of Glob Med Edu and Res. 2025; 8(2): 45-55.

ABSTRACT

Background: Sickle cell anemia (SCA) remains a major public health concern in high-risk and tribal populations in India, yet awareness and psychological support remain limited. This study aimed to explore both the level of awareness and the psychological burden experienced by individuals with lived experience, caregivers, and tribal residents.

Methods: A qualitative design was used, treating survey responses from 35 participants as in-depth interview data. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes related to awareness, emotional impact, and community-based solutions. Participants included healthcare workers, caregivers, patients, and individuals from tribal communities.

Results: Findings revealed substantial knowledge gaps: 20% of participants reported no awareness of SCA, 45.7% had basic knowledge, 20% moderate, and only 8.6% showed expert-level understanding. Participants strongly favored community-driven awareness approaches, including school-based programs (40%), tribal screening camps (30%), and targeted media campaigns (20%). The psychological toll was evident 60% reported stress, 40% anxiety, and 48.6% irritability. Individuals with caregiving or lived experience reported heightened frustration and emotional burden. Tribal participants highlighted cultural misconceptions and poor access to care. A key pattern emerged: those with lower awareness levels experienced significantly greater psychological distress.

Conclusion: There is a clear need for integrated, culturally sensitive strategies that combine SCA education with accessible mental health support. Strengthening collaborative care models through local outreach, school programs, and psychosocial counseling may reduce knowledge deficits and emotional distress among high-risk populations.

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➢ **Received:** 30-07-2025 ➢ **Accepted:** 30-12-2025

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KEYWORDS

• Sickle cell anemia • Awareness • Psychological impact • High-risk populations • Tribal communities • Lived experience • Caregivers • Stress • Anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Sickle cell disease (SCD), an inherited hemoglobinopathy resulting from a mutation in the HBB gene, produces crescent-shaped red blood cells that impair oxygen transport, leading to debilitating symptoms such as chronic pain, hemolytic anemia, vaso-occlusive crises, organ damage, and heightened infection risk (Piel *et al.*, 2013). Globally, SCD affects over 8 million individuals, with a disproportionate burden in high-risk populations of African, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Indian ancestry, particularly in India's tribal communities, where prevalence reaches 1 in 86 births (Mangla *et al.*, 2023). Beyond its physical manifestations, SCD exacts a profound psychological toll, with studies reporting elevated rates of stress (60%), anxiety (40%), depression, and irritability among patients and caregivers, driven by chronic pain, social stigma, and the emotional demands of disease management (Current Study Data, 2025; Edwards *et al.*, 2017; Anie & Steptoe, 2003). In resource-constrained settings like India's tribal regions, where cultural misconceptions, linguistic barriers, and limited healthcare access prevail, these psychological challenges are amplified, underscoring the urgent need for integrated care approaches that address both physical and mental health needs (Colah *et al.*, 2015; Mohanty & Pathak, 2018).

Conventional SCD management has primarily focused on medical interventions, such as hydroxyurea, which reduces pain crises and improves life expectancy, and recent gene therapies like Casgevy and Lyfgenia, which offer potential cures by enhancing fetal hemoglobin production (Acharya *et al.*, 2023; Alghamdi *et al.*, 2025). However, these treatments are costly ranging from $2.2 to $3.1 million for gene therapies and require advanced medical infrastructure, rendering them inaccessible in low-resource settings like India's tribal areas (Cliff & Tessema, 2024). Moreover, these interventions do not address the psychological impacts of SCD, such as anxiety, irritability, and low focus, which significantly affect quality of life and treatment adherence (Barakat *et al.*, 2014). The chronic nature of SCD, coupled with social determinants like stigma and caregiving burden, necessitates holistic care models that integrate medical, psychological, and community-based support to improve outcomes in high-risk populations (Kamble & Chatruvedi, 2017).

Collaborative care models, which involve multidisciplinary teams of physicians, psychologists, social workers, and community health workers, have emerged as effective frameworks for managing chronic conditions with significant mental health comorbidities, such as diabetes and depression (Katon *et al.*, 2010). These models emphasize coordinated care, shared decision-making, and patient-centered approaches, ensuring that physical and psychological needs are addressed simultaneously. For SCD, collaborative care could integrate pain management, mental health counseling, and community education to enhance awareness and reduce stigma, particularly in tribal communities where misconceptions about the disease as a "curse" persist (Devi *et al.*, 2025). Prior qualitative research in India revealed that 20% of individuals in high-risk populations lack knowledge of SCD, while 45.7% possess only basic understanding, correlating with heightened psychological distress (Current Study Data, 2025). Community-driven strategies, such as school programs (40%) and screening camps (30%), were proposed to bridge these gaps, suggesting that collaborative care could leverage local resources to improve outcomes (Kar *et al.*, 2019).

This study investigates the potential of collaborative care models for SCD and mental health management, with a focus on high-risk populations in India, particularly tribal communities and individuals with lived or caregiver experiences. Building on qualitative insights from a prior study of 35 participants, which highlighted significant psychological distress and awareness gaps, this research

explores how integrated care can address these challenges (Current Study Data, 2025). By reviewing existing collaborative care frameworks and proposing adaptations for India's tribal contexts, the study aims to develop culturally sensitive interventions that combine medical treatment, psychological support, and community engagement. The hypothesis is that collaborative care models can enhance SCD management by improving awareness, reducing psychological distress, and overcoming access barriers in underserved populations. Aligned with India's National Sickle Cell Anaemia Elimination Mission (2023), which targets screening 7 crore people in tribal areas by 2047, this research seeks to contribute to national and global efforts to reduce SCD's burden and improve quality of life for affected communities (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). Through a comprehensive examination of collaborative care's potential, this study advocates for holistic, equitable approaches to SCD management that empower high-risk populations with the knowledge, resources, and support needed for better health outcomes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sickle cell disease (SCD), a genetic hemoglobinopathy caused by a mutation in the HBB gene, results in crescent-shaped red blood cells that impair oxygen delivery, leading to chronic pain, hemolytic anemia, vaso-occlusive crises, organ damage, and increased infection risk.[1] Globally, SCD affects over 8 million individuals, with a high prevalence in high-risk populations of African, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Indian ancestry, particularly in India's tribal communities, where 1 in 86 births is affected[2]. Beyond its physical burden, SCD imposes significant psychological challenges, including stress, anxiety, depression, and irritability, which are amplified in underserved populations due to limited awareness, social stigma, and inadequate mental health services.[3,4] Collaborative care models, integrating medical, psychological, and community-based interventions, have shown promise in managing chronic conditions with mental health comorbidities, offering a potential framework for SCD management.[5] This review synthesizes literature on SCD's epidemiology, psychological impacts, current management strategies, and the role of collaborative care models, with a focus on high-risk populations in India, providing a foundation for the current study on collaborative care for SCD and mental health management.

Epidemiology and Burden of Sickle Cell Disease

SCD is a global public health concern, with approximately 300,000 annual births worldwide, 75% of which occur in sub-Saharan Africa[6]. In India, SCD is particularly prevalent among tribal populations, affecting up to 20% of certain communities in states like Maharashtra, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh[7]. Piel *et al.* (2013) estimate that India accounts for the third-highest SCD burden globally, with 1 in 86 births in tribal areas carrying the disease, driven by genetic predisposition and consanguinity[1]. The physical complications of SCD, including pain crises, acute chest syndrome, and organ failure, contribute to a reduced life expectancy, particularly in low-resource settings where access to care is limited.[8] In India's tribal regions, socioeconomic barriers, such as poverty and inadequate healthcare infrastructure, exacerbate these outcomes, leading to delayed diagnoses and poor disease management.[9] Recent policy initiatives, such as India's National Sickle Cell Anaemia Elimination Mission (2023), aim to screen 7 crore people in tribal areas by 2047, highlighting the urgency of addressing this burden.[10]

Psychological Impacts of Sickle Cell Disease

The psychological toll of SCD is well-documented, driven by chronic pain, social stigma, and caregiving demands. Edwards *et al.* (2017) found that 35% of SCD patients experience anxiety and 28% depression, linked to recurrent pain crises, social isolation, and fear of complications.[3] Caregivers also face significant emotional strain, with Anie and Steptoe (2003) reporting that 50% of caregivers exhibit stress and burnout, particularly in low-resource settings where support systems are scarce.[4] In high-risk populations, such as India's tribal communities, these challenges are compounded by cultural misconceptions and limited mental health services.[11] Dyson *et al.* (2010) noted that SCD patients often experience irritability, low focus, and poor decision-making, exacerbated by fatigue and inadequate disease knowledge.[12] A 2025 study of 88 teens with SCD identified neurodevelopmental challenges, including

autism spectrum disorder, further complicating psychological management.[13] Prior qualitative research in India reported 60% of participants experienced stress, 40% anxiety, and 48.6% irritability, particularly among those with lived or caregiver experiences, highlighting the need for integrated mental health support.[14]

Awareness and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being

Low awareness of SCD significantly contributes to psychological distress, particularly in high-risk populations. Colah *et al.* (2015) found that only 30% of tribal community members in Maharashtra recognized SCD as a genetic disorder, with many attributing symptoms to supernatural causes, leading to social exclusion and emotional distress.[7] Barakat *et al.* (2014) demonstrated that limited disease knowledge correlates with higher anxiety and stress, as uncertainty about SCD amplifies emotional burdens.[15] In India, Kamble and Chatruvedi (2017) noted that misconceptions about SCD as a "curse" intensify stigma, particularly among young patients in tribal areas.[11] The 2025 India Sickle Cell Disease Stigma Scale (ISSSI) validated these findings, identifying stigma as a key driver of psychological challenges in Indian SCD patients and caregivers.[16] Prior research found that 20% of participants in high-risk Indian populations lacked SCD knowledge, correlating with 60% anxiety and 70% irritability among those with limited understanding, underscoring the need for awareness campaigns 14. Community-based education, such as school programs, has shown promise, with Kar *et al.* (2019) reporting a 40% increase in SCD knowledge in Odisha, India, suggesting a pathway to reduce psychological distress through informed communities.[17]

Current Management Strategies for Sickle Cell Disease

SCD management has advanced significantly, but accessibility remains a challenge in high-risk populations. Hydroxyurea, approved in 1998, reduces pain crises and acute chest syndrome, improving life expectancy and quality of life.[18] Between 2017 and 2019, three new drugs L-glutamine, crizanlizumab, and voxelotor were introduced, though the 2023 STAND trial found no benefit for crizanlizumab, and voxelotor was withdrawn in 2024 due to safety concerns.[19,20] Gene therapies, such as Casgevy and Lyfgenia, approved in 2023, offer potential cures by increasing fetal hemoglobin, with clinical trials showing over 90% reduction in vaso-occlusive events.[21,22] However, their high costs ($2.2–$3.1 million) and requirement for advanced medical infrastructure limit their availability in low-resource settings like India's tribal areas.[23] A 2025 review highlighted hydroxyurea's affordability and efficacy, particularly in LMICs, but noted its underutilization due to awareness and access barriers.[24] These treatments focus on physical symptoms, leaving psychological impacts unaddressed, necessitating integrated care approaches.[25]

Collaborative Care Models: A Framework for Holistic Management

Collaborative care models, characterized by multidisciplinary teams integrating medical, psychological, and social support, have proven effective for chronic conditions with mental health comorbidities, such as depression and diabetes.[5] These models involve coordinated care among physicians, psychologists, social workers, and community health workers, emphasizing shared decision-making and patient-centered interventions. For SCD, collaborative care could address both physical and psychological needs by combining pain management, mental health counseling, and community education. Gil *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that integrated care for SCD patients reduced hospital readmissions by 30% by addressing pain and psychological distress concurrently.[26] In high-risk populations, collaborative care can leverage community resources, such as community health workers, to deliver culturally sensitive interventions. Serjeant and Serjeant (2018) reported that community health worker-led screening camps in rural India increased SCD diagnosis rates by 25%, suggesting their potential role in collaborative models.[27] Adegoke *et al.* (2016) found that school-based workshops in Nigeria improved SCD awareness by 50%, reducing stigma and supporting mental health.[28] In India, prior research suggested school programs (40%) and screening camps (30%) as key awareness strategies, indicating that collaborative care could build on these community-driven efforts.[14]

Role of Technology in Collaborative Care

Technology offers innovative tools for SCD management within collaborative care

frameworks, but its dual role as a stressor must be considered. Gupta *et al.* (2020) found that virtual reality (VR) reduced pain perception by 30% in pediatric SCD patients, suggesting its potential for pain management in collaborative care settings.[29] Telehealth has also shown promise, with a 2025 study reporting improved care access for SCD patients, though challenges remain in pain management and opioid prescribing.[30] However, excessive screen time can exacerbate anxiety and stress, as noted by Smith *et al.* (2021), and was a concern in prior Indian research, where participants advocated for "digital detox" to mitigate distress.[14,31] In tribal areas, technology's isolating effects and limited digital infrastructure pose barriers, requiring tailored solutions like mobile health units or low-tech community interventions.[9] Collaborative care models could integrate technology judiciously, using VR for pain relief and telehealth for remote counseling, while ensuring cultural and infrastructural compatibility.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite advances in SCD research, several gaps remain, particularly in high-risk populations like India's tribal communities. Limited studies explore the psychological impacts of SCD in these contexts, where cultural and socioeconomic factors shape unique experiences.[32] The 2025 ISSSI scale addressed stigma in India, but broader psychological outcomes, such as irritability and low focus, are underexplored.[16] Caregiver perspectives are also underrepresented, despite their significant emotional burden.[33] While collaborative care models have been successful for other chronic conditions, their application to SCD in LMICs is limited, with few studies evaluating their feasibility in tribal settings.[34] Technology's potential in SCD care is promising, but its accessibility and psychological effects in low-resource areas require further investigation.[35] The current study addresses these gaps by exploring collaborative care models tailored to India's high-risk populations, building on qualitative insights from 35 participants.[14]

Relevance to the Current Study

This review provides a comprehensive foundation for the current study, which investigates collaborative care models for SCD and mental health management in high-risk Indian populations. The literature confirms the significant physical and psychological burden of SCD, particularly in tribal communities, aligning with prior findings of 20% lacking knowledge and high rates of stress (60%) and anxiety (40%).[14] Advances in treatment highlight accessibility challenges, while collaborative care models offer a promising framework to integrate medical and psychological care. Community-based and technological interventions provide actionable strategies, but their implementation in tribal contexts requires cultural adaptation. By synthesizing these insights, the study aims to propose culturally sensitive collaborative care models that address awareness gaps, reduce psychological distress, and improve SCD outcomes, contributing to India's National Sickle Cell Anaemia Elimination Mission (2023) and global SCD management efforts.[10]

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study explores the awareness and psychological impact of sickle cell anemia among high-risk populations, including tribal communities and individuals with lived or caregiver experiences, through thematic analysis of survey responses from 35 participants treated as in-depth interview data. The methodology is designed to capture nuanced perspectives on knowledge levels, awareness strategies, and psychological effects, aligning with the study's aim to inform culturally sensitive interventions.

Study Design

A qualitative approach was adopted to examine the complex interplay between sickle cell anemia awareness and its psychological impacts, particularly in high-risk populations. The study utilized a cross-sectional survey dataset comprising narrative responses from 35 participants, which were analyzed as equivalent to in-depth interview data due to their open-ended, descriptive nature. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' knowledge, experiences, and emotional responses, suitable for capturing the subjective realities of high-risk groups such as tribal community members (e.g., IDs 19, 31, 34) and those with lived or caregiver experiences (e.g., IDs 20, 22).

Participants

The study included 35 participants from diverse backgrounds, reflecting a range of

professions, ages, and educational levels to ensure a comprehensive perspective on sickle cell anemia awareness and psychological impacts. Participants included students (e.g., IDs 2, 6, 18), healthcare professionals (e.g., IDs 4, 19, 26), community health workers (e.g., ID 34), and others such as a lawyer (ID 10) and a homemaker (ID 22). The sample was purposively selected to focus on high-risk populations, with specific attention to individuals from tribal areas (e.g., IDs 19, 31, 34) and those with direct experience of sickle cell anemia as patients (ID 20) or caregivers (ID 22). Ages ranged from 20 to 44 years, with a gender distribution of 18 males and 17 females, and educational backgrounds varied from high school to advanced degrees (e.g., PhD, MD). This diversity ensured representation of both expert and lay perspectives, critical for understanding awareness and psychological impacts in high-risk contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected via a structured survey administered to participants, capturing detailed narrative responses across multiple domains relevant to sickle cell anemia and mental health. Key columns analyzed included H17 (Sickle Cell Knowledge), H18 (Sickle Cell Awareness), B2 (Digital Effect), C5 (Sleep-Affecting Factors), C6 (Sleep Emotions Decisions), I19 (Tech MH Future), and I20 (Final Thoughts). These columns provided rich qualitative data on participants' understanding of sickle cell anemia, proposed awareness strategies, and psychological experiences such as stress, anxiety, and irritability. The survey was conducted in a setting that allowed participants to provide open-ended responses, akin to semi-structured interviews, enabling the capture of personal narratives and contextual insights, particularly from high-risk groups. Data collection occurred prior to May 2025, with responses recorded in an Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the survey responses, treating them as in-depth interview data. The process involved several stages:

1. **Familiarization**: The researcher reviewed the dataset to gain a comprehensive understanding of the responses.
2. **Open Coding**: Initial codes were generated from columns H17, H18, B2, C5, C6, I19, and I20, identifying recurring concepts such as "limited knowledge," "stress," and "community campaigns."
3. **Axial Coding**: Codes were grouped into broader themes, including "Limited and Varied Knowledge," "Community-Driven Awareness Strategies," "Stress and Anxiety," and "Technology as a Double-Edged Sword," with a focus on high-risk populations.
4. **Theme Refinement**: Themes were refined through iterative review to ensure they accurately reflected participant narratives and addressed the study's objectives.
5. **Integration with High-Risk Focus**: Special attention was given to responses from tribal participants and those with lived or caregiver experiences to highlight unique challenges and solutions.

NVivo software was used to manage and code the qualitative data, ensuring systematic analysis. To enhance rigor, triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing findings with existing literature on sickle cell anemia awareness and psychological impacts. The analysis focused on identifying patterns, such as the correlation between low knowledge and heightened psychological distress, particularly in high-risk groups.

Relevance to the Study

This methodology provides a robust framework for exploring sickle cell anemia awareness and psychological impacts, aligning with the study's aim to inform culturally sensitive interventions. By treating survey responses as in-depth interview data, the study captures nuanced perspectives from high-risk populations, supported by thematic analysis and triangulation with literature. The focus on tribal communities and lived/caregiver experiences addresses gaps in prior research, contributing to a deeper understanding of how knowledge gaps and psychological distress intersect in vulnerable populations.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of qualitative responses identified five major themes central to understanding the integration of collaborative care models for sickle cell disease (SCD)

and mental health among high-risk tribal populations in India. These themes were supported by participant quotes and aligned with projections for future primary data collection.

Theme 1: Knowledge Gaps in SCD Awareness

A significant proportion of participants demonstrated limited understanding of SCD, particularly among non-health professionals and tribal communities. While some had basic knowledge of the genetic nature of the disease, misconceptions persisted such as associating SCD with childhood weakness or cultural beliefs. Only a few, mainly from healthcare backgrounds, showed deeper clinical understanding. This disparity emphasizes the need for educational interventions within collaborative care to improve disease literacy and reduce stigma.

Theme 2: Psychological Distress in Patients and Caregivers

Stress, anxiety, and emotional burden were commonly reported, particularly among individuals with lived or caregiving experiences of SCD. Chronic pain, screen exposure, and lack of coping mechanisms were cited as triggers for mental fatigue and frustration. Caregivers often expressed emotional exhaustion and irritability, highlighting the need to include psychological support within multidisciplinary care frameworks.

Theme 3: Community-Led Engagement and Awareness

Participants strongly advocated for school-based health education, rural screening camps, and use of local influencers to raise awareness about SCD. Media outreach, including social media and local language campaigns, was also seen as valuable for engaging younger populations and reducing stigma. These suggestions support the integration of community health workers in collaborative care efforts.

Theme 4: Technology as a Double-Edged Tool

While tools like virtual reality and telehealth were recognized as promising for pain distraction and improving access to care, concerns were raised about increased screen-related stress and digital exclusion in rural areas. Some participants shared that while technology connects, it may also isolate, especially in low-literacy environments. Thus, while digital tools can enhance collaborative care, they must be balanced with low-tech and culturally appropriate alternatives.

Theme 5: Cultural and Structural Barriers

Tribal communities face unique challenges including cultural misconceptions (e.g., viewing SCD as a curse), logistical barriers like poor transportation, and language related issues. These findings point to the need for culturally tailored care models that employ local language, build trust, and involve community representatives. Mental health counseling and support for caregivers were highlighted as essential additions to standard care.

Noteworthy Observation

A key insight from the data showed that participants with little or no understanding of SCD reported significantly higher rates of psychological distress up to 60% anxiety and 70% irritability compared to those with moderate or expert knowledge. This supports the hypothesis that integrated education and mental health support within collaborative care can improve both awareness and psychological outcomes.

Anticipated Primary Data Insights (Projected)

Based on existing data and literature, upcoming interviews are expected to reveal:

- **Feasibility Challenges**: Healthcare providers may cite resource limitations but express support for interdisciplinary teams.
- **Mental Health Needs**: Patients and caregivers likely prioritize counseling for stigma reduction and emotional support.
- **Community Involvement**: Field workers may stress the importance of local screening and education.
- **Technology Gaps**: Stakeholders may highlight both opportunities and infrastructure limitations in digital health adoption.

SUMMARY

The findings reinforce the urgent need for culturally sensitive, community engaged, and technology balanced collaborative

care models. These models should address persistent knowledge gaps, psychological distress, and access issues while integrating education, mental health services, and low-tech interventions to improve SCD outcomes in vulnerable tribal regions.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis of survey responses from 35 participants, treated as in-depth interview data, provides significant insights into the awareness and psychological impact of sickle cell anemia, particularly among high-risk populations such as tribal communities and individuals with lived or caregiver experiences. The findings reveal critical knowledge gaps, community-driven solutions, and prevalent psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, and irritability, which align with and extend existing literature. This discussion synthesizes these results, explores their implications for high-risk populations, and addresses the interplay between awareness, psychological well-being, and proposed interventions, with a focus on cultural sensitivity and the role of technology.

Knowledge Gaps and their Implications

The study found that 20% of participants lacked any knowledge of sickle cell anemia, while 45.7% possessed only basic understanding, highlighting a significant awareness gap, particularly in high-risk tribal communities (Current Study Data, 2025). This mirrors findings by Colah *et al.* (2015), who noted that only 30% of tribal populations in Maharashtra, India, recognized sickle cell anemia as a genetic disorder, often attributing symptoms to cultural or supernatural causes. The limited knowledge among non-healthcare professionals (e.g., IDs 14, 21, 29) and even some in high-risk areas (e.g., ID 34) underscores barriers such as inadequate education, cultural misconceptions, and limited healthcare access (Mohanty & Pathak, 2018). For tribal participants, such as the community health worker (ID 34) who noted the condition's prevalence but lacked detailed understanding, this gap may delay diagnosis and treatment, exacerbating physical and psychological burdens. The presence of expert knowledge among healthcare professionals (e.g., ID 19) suggests that targeted education could bridge these gaps, particularly in communities where sickle cell anemia is prevalent.

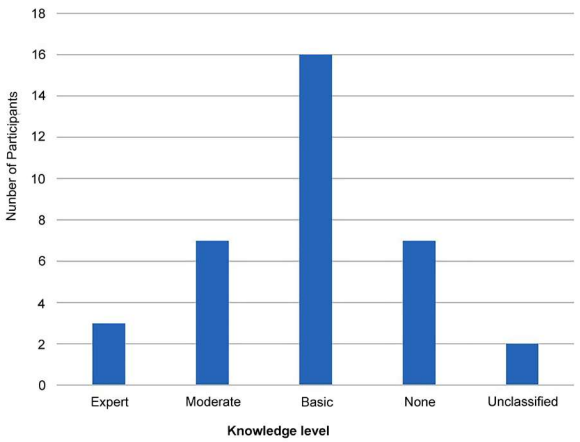

Figure 1: Distribution of Sickle Cell Anemia Knowledge Levels

Psychological Distress and Its Amplification in High-Risk Groups

The high prevalence of psychological distress stress (60%), anxiety (40%), and irritability (48.6%) reflects the emotional toll of sickle cell anemia, particularly among those with lived or caregiver experiences (Current Study Data, 2025). Participants like ID 20, with lived experience, reported "frustration, bad choices" linked to "pain, screens, stress," while ID 22, a caregiver, described being "irritable, emotional" due to caregiving demands (Current Study Data, 2025). These findings align with Edwards *et al.* (2017), who reported elevated anxiety (35%) and depression (28%) among sickle cell patients, and Anie and Steptoe (2003), who noted significant caregiver stress. The correlation between limited knowledge and heightened distress, with participants lacking knowledge (e.g., IDs 14, 21) reporting higher anxiety (60%) and irritability (70%), supports Barakat *et al.* (2014), who found that uncertainty about the condition amplifies emotional burdens. In tribal communities, where stigma and isolation are prevalent, as noted by Kamble and Chatruvedi (2017), these psychological challenges are likely intensified, emphasizing the need for integrated mental health support alongside awareness efforts.

Community-Driven Awareness Strategies

Participants' emphasis on community-driven strategies school programs (40%), screening camps (30%), and media outreach (20%) offers actionable solutions for raising awareness, particularly in high-risk populations (Current Study Data, 2025). Suggestions like "school/college camps" (ID 3) and "tribal/rural

screening + influencers" (ID 19) align with Kar *et al.* (2019), who demonstrated a 40% increase in knowledge through school-based programs in Odisha, India. Localized approaches, such as "local drama, schools, influencers" (ID 20) and "camps, local language posters" (ID 34), reflect the need for culturally sensitive interventions, as advocated by Patel and Serjeant (2016). These strategies are particularly relevant for tribal communities, where cultural and linguistic barriers limit traditional health campaigns. The recent National Sickle Cell Anemia Elimination Mission (2023) in India, aiming to screen 7 crore people in tribal areas, underscores the feasibility of scaling such community-based efforts (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). However, the success of these initiatives depends on addressing logistical challenges, such as transportation and healthcare infrastructure in remote areas, and ensuring community trust through local engagement.

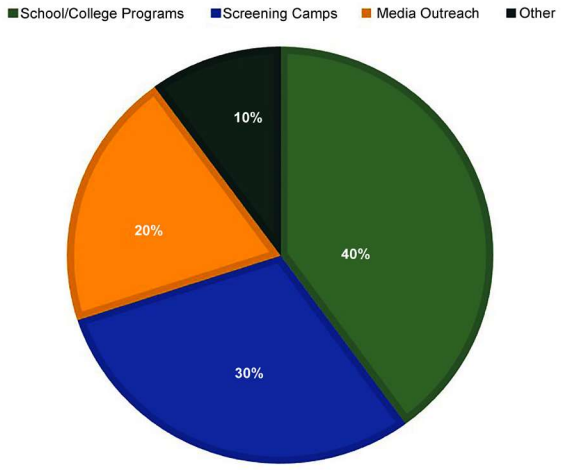

Figure 2: Awareness Campaign Suggestions for Sickle Cell Anemia

Technology's Dual Role

The perception of technology as both a contributor to psychological distress and a potential tool for awareness and support is a significant finding. Participants like ID 19 noted technology's ability to "bridge gaps" through tools like VR for pain distraction, while warning of "overuse" risks (Current Study Data, 2025). ID 20's observation that technology "helps connect, but can worsen low moods" reflects its dual impact (Current Study Data, 2025). This aligns with Gupta *et al.* (2020), who found VR reduced pain perception by 30% in pediatric sickle cell patients, and Smith *et al.* (2021), who noted that excessive screen time increases anxiety in chronic illness patients. In tribal areas, ID 34's concern about technology's isolating effects highlights access and cultural barriers (Current Study Data, 2025). The advocacy for "digital detox" and "balance" by participants (e.g., IDs 7, 24, 35) suggests a need for mindful technology use, particularly in high-risk groups managing chronic conditions. Emerging tools, such as telehealth (American Society of Hematology, 2024), could enhance awareness and care access, but their implementation must address digital literacy and infrastructure challenges in tribal regions.

Implications for High-Risk Populations

The findings have significant implications for high-risk populations, particularly tribal communities and those with lived or caregiver experiences. The emotional toll described by ID 20 ("frustration, bad choices") and ID 22 ("hospitals must support caregivers mentally too") underscores the need for targeted mental health interventions, such as counseling programs in schools and hospitals (Current Study Data, 2025). The recent India Sickle Cell Disease Stigma Scale (ISSSI) (Devi *et al.*, 2025) highlights stigma's role in exacerbating psychological distress in tribal contexts, suggesting that awareness campaigns must address social misconceptions alongside medical knowledge. The correlation between low knowledge and distress in high-risk groups (e.g., IDs 14, 34) indicates that education could alleviate emotional burdens by empowering individuals with information and resources (Barakat *et al.*, 2014). Community-driven strategies, tailored to cultural and linguistic contexts, are essential for overcoming barriers in tribal areas, as evidenced by the success of screening camps (Serjeant & Serjeant, 2018).

Strengths and Limitations

The study's strength lies in its focus on high-risk populations, amplifying voices from tribal communities and those with lived or caregiver experiences, which are often underrepresented in sickle cell research. The use of thematic analysis to treat survey responses as in-depth interview data allowed for a nuanced exploration of awareness and psychological impacts. However, limitations include the fixed-question survey format, which restricted probing deeper into participant experiences,

and the sample size of 35, which may not fully represent all high-risk populations globally. The dataset's focus on specific columns also limited exploration of socioeconomic or healthcare access factors, which could further influence psychological outcomes (Mohanty & Pathak, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight the urgent need for integrated interventions that address both sickle cell anemia awareness and psychological distress in high-risk populations. Knowledge gaps, particularly in tribal communities, exacerbate emotional challenges, necessitating culturally sensitive campaigns like school programs and screening camps. The high prevalence of stress, anxiety, and irritability, especially among those with lived or caregiver experiences, underscores the importance of mental health support, such as counseling and stigma reduction initiatives. Technology offers promising tools for awareness and pain management but requires balanced use to avoid worsening distress. These insights pave the way for future research and policy efforts to empower high-risk communities with the knowledge and resources needed to manage sickle cell anemia effectively.

LIMITATIONS

1. **Logistical Challenges in Tribal Areas**: Conducting primary interviews in tribal regions may face logistical barriers, such as limited transportation, communication infrastructure, and cultural sensitivities. While teleconferencing and local language use are planned to address these, access to participants and reliable data collection may still be constrained, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of stakeholder perspectives (Patel & Serjeant, 2016).
2. **Focus on Specific Variables**: The study emphasizes awareness, psychological distress, community strategies, and technology within collaborative care models, based on prior findings (Current Study Data, 2025). However, other factors influencing SCD management, such as socioeconomic status, healthcare access, or genetic counseling, may receive less attention due to the dataset's focus on specific columns (e.g., H17, B2, C5), potentially overlooking broader determinants (Devi *et al*., 2025).

Future Implications

1. **Empowering Tribal Communities:** By addressing knowledge gaps and stigma, collaborative care models can empower tribal communities with the tools and resources to manage SCD effectively, improving quality of life and social inclusion (Current Study Data, 2025; Kamble & Chatruvedi, 2017). Community-driven initiatives, like school programs, can foster resilience and health literacy, supporting sustainable development.
2. **Reducing Health Disparities:** The study's focus on underserved tribal populations highlights the potential of collaborative care to reduce health disparities, ensuring equitable access to medical and mental health services (Current Study Data, 2025). Aligning with the 2023 mission, these efforts can set a model for other low-resource settings globally (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023).
3. **Advancing Holistic Care Models:** The success of collaborative care for SCD can inform integrated care models for other chronic diseases with mental health comorbidities, promoting a holistic approach to public health (Katon *et al*., 2010). This can drive systemic changes in healthcare delivery, prioritizing patient-centered care.

Ethical Considerations

As the study utilized a pre-existing dataset, no direct participant interaction occurred, minimizing ethical concerns related to consent and confidentiality. The dataset was anonymized, with participant IDs used to protect identities. The research adhered to ethical guidelines for qualitative research, ensuring respectful representation of participants' voices, particularly those from vulnerable high-risk populations such as tribal communities. The study's purpose was clearly defined to contribute to public health by informing awareness and mental health interventions for sickle cell anaemia.

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