Diabetes Population Health Innovations in the Age of COVID-19: Insights From the T1D Exchange Quality Improvement Collaborative

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ABSTRACT

There have been remarkable innovations in diabetes management since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but these groundbreaking innovations are drawing limited focus as the field focuses on the adverse impact of the pandemic on patients with diabetes. This article reviews select population health innovations in diabetes management that have become available over the past 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the T1D Exchange Quality Improvement Collaborative, a learning health network that focuses on improving care and outcomes for individuals with type 1 diabetes (T1D). Such innovations include expanded telemedicine access, collection of real-world data, machine learning and artificial intelligence, and new diabetes medications and devices. In addition, multiple innovative studies have been undertaken to explore contributors to health inequities in diabetes, and advocacy efforts for specific populations have been successful. Looking to the future, work is required to explore additional health equity successes that do not further exacerbate inequities and to look for additional innovative ways to engage people with T1D in their health care through conversations on social determinants of health and societal structures.

Keywords: type 1 diabetes, learning health network, continuous glucose monitoring, health equity

ne in 10 people in the United States has diabetes.¹ Diabetes is the nation's second leading cause of death, costing the US health system more than \$300 billion annually.² The COVID-19 pandemic presented additional health burdens for people living with diabetes. For example, preexisting diabetes was identified as a risk factor for COVID-19–associated morbidity and mortality.^{3,4} Over the past 2 years, there have been remarkable innovations in diabetes management, including stem cell therapy and new medication options. Additionally, improved technology solutions have aided in diabetes management through continuous glucose monitors (CGM), smart insulin pens, advanced hybrid closed-loop systems, and continuous subcutaneous insulin injections.^{5,6} Unfortunately, these groundbreaking innovations are drawing limited focus, as the field is rightfully focused on the adverse impact of the pandemic on patients with diabetes.

Learning health networks like the T1D Exchange Quality Improvement Collaborative (T1DX-QI) have implemented some of these innovative solutions to improve care for people with diabetes.⁷ T1DX-QI has more than 50 data-sharing endocrinology centers that care for over 75,000 people with diabetes across the United States (**Figure 1**). Centers participating in the T1DX-QI use quality improvement (QI) and implementation science methods to quickly translate research into evidence-based clinical practice. T1DX-QI leads diabetes population health and health system research and supports widespread transferability across health care organizations through regular collaborative calls, conferences, and case study documentation.⁸

In this review, we summarize impactful population health innovations in diabetes management that

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Figure 1. Geographical distribution of T1DX-QI Centers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

have become available over the past 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of T1DX-QI (see **Figure 2** for relevant definitions). This review is limited in scope and is not meant to be an exhaustive list of innovations. The review also reflects significant changes from the perspective of academic diabetes centers, which may not apply to rural or primary care diabetes practices.

Methods

The first (A.M.), second (H.H.), and senior (O.E.) authors conducted a scoping review of published literature using terms related to diabetes, population health, and innovation on PubMed Central and Google Scholar for the period March 2020 to June 2022. To complement the review, A.M. and O.E. also reviewed abstracts from presentations at major international diabetes conferences, including the American Diabetes Association (ADA), the International Society for Pediatric and Adolescent Diabetes (ISPAD), the T1DX-QI Learning Session Conference, and the Advanced Technologies & Treatments for Diabetes (ATTD) 2020 to 2022 conferences.⁹⁻¹⁴ The authors also searched FDA.gov and ClinicalTrials.gov for relevant insights. A.M. and O.E. sorted the reviewed literature into major themes (**Figure 3**) from the population health improvement perspective of the T1DX-QI.

Population Health Innovations in Diabetes Management

Expansion of Telemedicine Access

Telemedicine is cost-effective for patients with diabetes,¹⁵ including those with complex cases.¹⁶ Before the COVID-19 pandemic, telemedicine and virtual care were rare in diabetes management. However, the pandemic offered a new opportunity to expand the practice of telemedicine in diabetes management. A study from the T1DX-QI showed that telemedicine visits grew from comprising <1% of visits pre-pandemic (December 2019) to 95.2% during the pandemic (August 2020).¹⁷ Additional studies, like those conducted by Phillip et al,¹⁸ confirmed the noninferiority of telemedicine practice for patients with diabetes.Telemedicine was also found to be an effective strategy to educate patients on the use of diabetes technologies.¹⁹

Real-World Data and Disease Surveillance

As the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated outcomes for people with type 1 diabetes (T1D), a need arose to understand the immediate effects of the pandemic on people with T1D through real-world data and disease surveillance. In April 2020, the T1DX-QI initiated a multicenter surveillance study to collect data and analyze the impact

Type 1 diabetes: A chronic condition where a person's immune system destroys insulin-making beta cells in the pancreas. Patients with type 1 diabetes require regular insulin to manage blood sugar levels.

Population health: Understanding the health status and health outcomes within a group of people rather than considering the health of 1 person at a time, as defined by the World Health Organization.

Quality improvement: A deliberate process to evaluate the quality of care and services, pursue opportunities to improve, and resolve identified problems objectively and systematically.

Health systems research: A multidisciplinary scientific field that examines how people access health care practitioners and services, as well as the cost and results of this care.

Innovation: A practice of developing and introducing new things.

Figure 2. Key definitions

of COVID-19 on people with T1D. The existing health collaborative served as a springboard for robust surveillance study, documenting numerous works on the effects of COVID-19.^{3,4,20-28} Other investigators also embraced the power of real-world surveillance and real-world data.^{29,30}

Big Data, Machine Learning, and Artificial Intelligence

The past 2 years have seen a shift toward embracing the incredible opportunity to tap the large volume of data generated from routine care for practical insights.³¹ In particular, researchers have demonstrated the wide-spread application of machine learning and artificial intelligence to improve diabetes management.³² The T1DX-QI also harnessed the growing power of big data by expanding the functionality of innovative benchmark-ing software. The T1DX QI Portal uses electronic medical record data of diabetes patients for clinic-to-clinic benchmarking and data analysis, using business intelligence solutions.³³

Health Equity

While inequities across various health outcomes have been well documented for years,³⁴ the COVID-19 pandemic further exaggerated racial/ethnic health inequities in T1D.^{23,35} In response, several organizations have outlined specific strategies to address these health inequities. Emboldened by the pandemic, the T1DX-QI announced a multipronged approach to address health inequities among patients with T1D through the Health Equity Advancement Lab (HEAL).³⁶ One of HEAL's main components is using real-world data to champion population-level insights and demonstrate progress in QI efforts.

Multiple innovative studies have been undertaken to explore contributors to health inequities in diabetes, and these studies are expanding our understanding of the chasm.³⁷ There have also been innovative solutions to addressing these inequities, with multiple studies published over the past 2 years.³⁸ A source of inequity among patients with T1D is the lack of representation of racial/ ethnic minorities with T1D in clinical trials.³⁹ The T1DX-QI suggests that the equity-adapted framework for QI can be applied by research leaders to support trial diversity and representation, ensuring future device innovations are meaningful for all people with T1D.⁴⁰

Diabetes Devices

Glucose monitoring and insulin therapy are vital tools to support individuals living with T1D, and devices such as CGM and insulin pumps have become the standard of care for diabetes management (**Table**).⁴¹ Innovations in diabetes technology and device access are imperative for a chronic disease with no cure.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity to increase access to diabetes devices in inpatient settings. In 2020, the US Food and Drug Administration expanded the use of CGM to support remote monitoring of patients in inpatient hospital settings, simultaneously supporting the glucose monitoring needs of patients with T1D and reducing COVID-19 transmission through reduced patient-clinician contact.⁴² This effort has been expanded and will continue in 2022 and beyond,⁴³ and aligns with the growing consensus that supports patients wearing both CGMs and insulin



Figure 3. Diabetes population health innovations

pumps in ambulatory settings to improve patient health outcomes.⁴⁴

Since 2020, innovations in diabetes technology have improved and increased the variety of options available to people with T1D and made them easier to use (Table). New, advanced hybrid closed-loop systems have progressed to offer Bluetooth features, including automatic software upgrades, tubeless systems, and the ability to allow parents to use their smartphones to bolus for children.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁷ The next big step in insulin delivery innovation is the release of functioning, fully closed loop systems, of which several are currently in clinical trials.⁴⁸ These systems support reduced hypoglycemia and improved time in range.⁴⁹

Additional innovations in insulin delivery have improved the user experience and expanded therapeutic options, including a variety of smart insulin pens complete with dosing logs^{50,51} and even a patch to deliver insulin without the burden of injections.⁵² As barriers to diabetes technology persist,⁵³ innovations in alternate insulin delivery provide people with T1D more options to align with their personal access and technology preferences.

Innovations in CGM address cited barriers to their use, including size or overall wear.⁵³⁻⁵⁵ CGMs released in the past few years are smaller in physical size, have longer durations of time between changings, are more accurate, and do not require calibrations for accuracy.

New Diabetes Medications

Many new medications and therapeutic advances have become available in the past 2 years.⁵⁶ Additionally, more medications are being tested as adjunct therapies to support glycemic management in patients with T1D, including metformin, sodium-glucose cotransporter 1 and 2 inhibitors, pramlintide, glucagon-like polypeptide-1 analogs, and glucagon receptor agonists.⁵⁷ Other recent advances include stem cell replacement therapy for patients with T1D.⁵⁸ The ultra-long-acting biosimilar insulins are one medical innovation that has been stalled, rather than propelled, during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁹

Diabetes Policy Advocacy

People with T1D require insulin to survive. The cost of insulin has increased in recent years, with some studies citing a 64% to 100% increase in the past decade.^{60,61} In fact, 1 in 4 insulin users report that cost has impacted their insulin use, including rationing their insulin.⁶² Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic stressed US families financially, increasing the urgency for insulin cost caps.

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Device Type	Device	Features
Hospital management device	Dexcom G6	In 2020, FDA granted breakthrough designation for CGM for inpatient use in remote glucose monitoring during COVID-19
Hybrid closed-loop system	Medtronic 770G	Uses app to track blood sugars; Bluetooth-enabled version of 670G; a first system approved for use in children aged 2 through 6 years
	Tandem X2 with Control I.Q.	More-extended sensor wear and smaller pump size; first FDA- approved pump capable of remote feature updates; has a preset target of 110 mg/dL
	Omnipod 5	The first tubeless system; no disconnection is needed for water
Connected insulin pen	Medtronic InPen	Allows remote monitoring; holds up to 1 year's worth of data
	Bigfoot Unity System	Can incorporate integrated CGM data; uses FreeStyle Libre 2 sensor; hypoglycemia alerts in real time
Insulin patch	CeQur Simplicity insulin patch	3-day wear time, waterproof, reusable inserter, 2-increment bolus button
CGM	FreeStyle Libre 2	14-day wear time; optional real-time alarms to alert patients to hypo- or hyperglycemia
	FreeStyle Libre 3	Smaller than Libre 2, improved accuracy
	Dexcom G7	Approved in Europe, expected US launch forthcoming in 2022; smaller size, improved accuracy, faster warm-up time
Implantable CGM	Eversense E3	Fully implantable CGM lasts up to 6 months; requires 2 sensor insertions per year; Bluetooth-enabled to connect to smart phones; improved accuracy
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Table. New Diabetes Technologies 2020-2022

Note: This table is not an exhaustive listing but rather describes a sample of new technology available. CGM, continuous glucose monitor; FDA, US Food and Drug Administration.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic halted national conversations on drug financing,⁶³ advocacy efforts have succeeded for specific populations. The new Medicare Part D Senior Savings Model will cap the cost of insulin at \$35 for a 30-day supply,⁶⁴ and 20 states passed legislation capping insulin pricing.⁶² Efforts to codify national cost caps are under debate, including the passage of the Affordable Insulin Now Act, which passed the House in March 2022 and is currently under review in the Senate.⁶⁵

Perspective: The Role of Private Philanthropy in Supporting Population Health Innovations

Funders and industry partners play a crucial role in leading and supporting innovations that improve the lives of people with T1D and reduce society's costs of living with the disease. Data infrastructure is critical to supporting population health. While building the data infrastructure to support population health is both timeand resource-intensive, private foundations such as Helmsley are uniquely positioned—and have a responsibility—to take large, informed risks to help reach all communities with T1D.

The T1DX-QI is the largest source of population health data on T1D in the United States and is becoming the premiere data authority on its incidence, prevalence, and outcomes. The T1DX-QI enables a robust understanding of T1D-related health trends at the population level, as well as trends among clinics and providers. Pilot centers in the T1DX-QI have reported reductions in patients' A1c and acute diabetes-related events, as well as improvements in device usage and depression screening. The ability to capture changes speaks to the promise and power of these data to demonstrate the clinical impact of QI interventions and to support the spread of best practices and learnings across health systems.

Additional philanthropic efforts have supported innovation in the last 2 years. For example, the JDRF, a nonprofit philanthropic equity firm, has supported efforts in developing artificial pancreas systems and cell therapies currently in clinical trials like teplizumab, a drug that has demonstrated delayed onset of T1D through JDRF's T1D Fund.⁶⁶ Industry partners also have an opportunity for significant influence in this area, as they continue to fund meaningful projects to advance care for people with T1D.⁶⁷

Conclusion

We are optimistic that the innovations summarized here describe a shift in the tide of equitable T1D outcomes; however, future work is required to explore additional health equity successes that do not further exacerbate inequities. We also see further opportunities for innovative ways to engage people with T1D in their health care through conversations on social determinants of health and societal structures.

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