Language Access:
A case study in healthcare disparities

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Importance of language access

- 26 million individuals in the US speak English less than “very well” >>>LEP
- 13 million speak English “not at all” or “not well”
- ~4% of population: equivalent to
    - patients with schizophrenia: 1%
    - patients with rheumatoid arthritis: ~1%
    - patients with HCV: 1%
    - patients with cirrhosis: 0.27%
    - patients with ESRD: 0.3%

American Community Survey, 2021.

Language barriers difficult care

Language barriers:

- Poorer comprehension of medical diagnosis and treatment
- Less satisfaction with physician and encounter
- Less trust in physician

- Worse clinical outcomes (glycemic control in diabetes)

- Increased safety issues with medications and in hospitals

- ED return visits

Karliner, LS. Health Serv Res, 2007.
Schenker/Fernandez. Patient Educ Couns, 2010.
Parker/Fernandez. JAMA Intern Med, 2017.
AHRQ Publication No. 12-0041, 2012.
Ngai, Ann Emerg Med,2016.

Language access services crucial to equity

- Language concordant physicians are best
- Professional interpreters improve patient reported and clinical outcomes: decades of evidence
- Mandated by federal statutory requirements (Title VI Civil Rights Act). Unfunded
- Often not employed despite some technological advances e.g. video interpretation

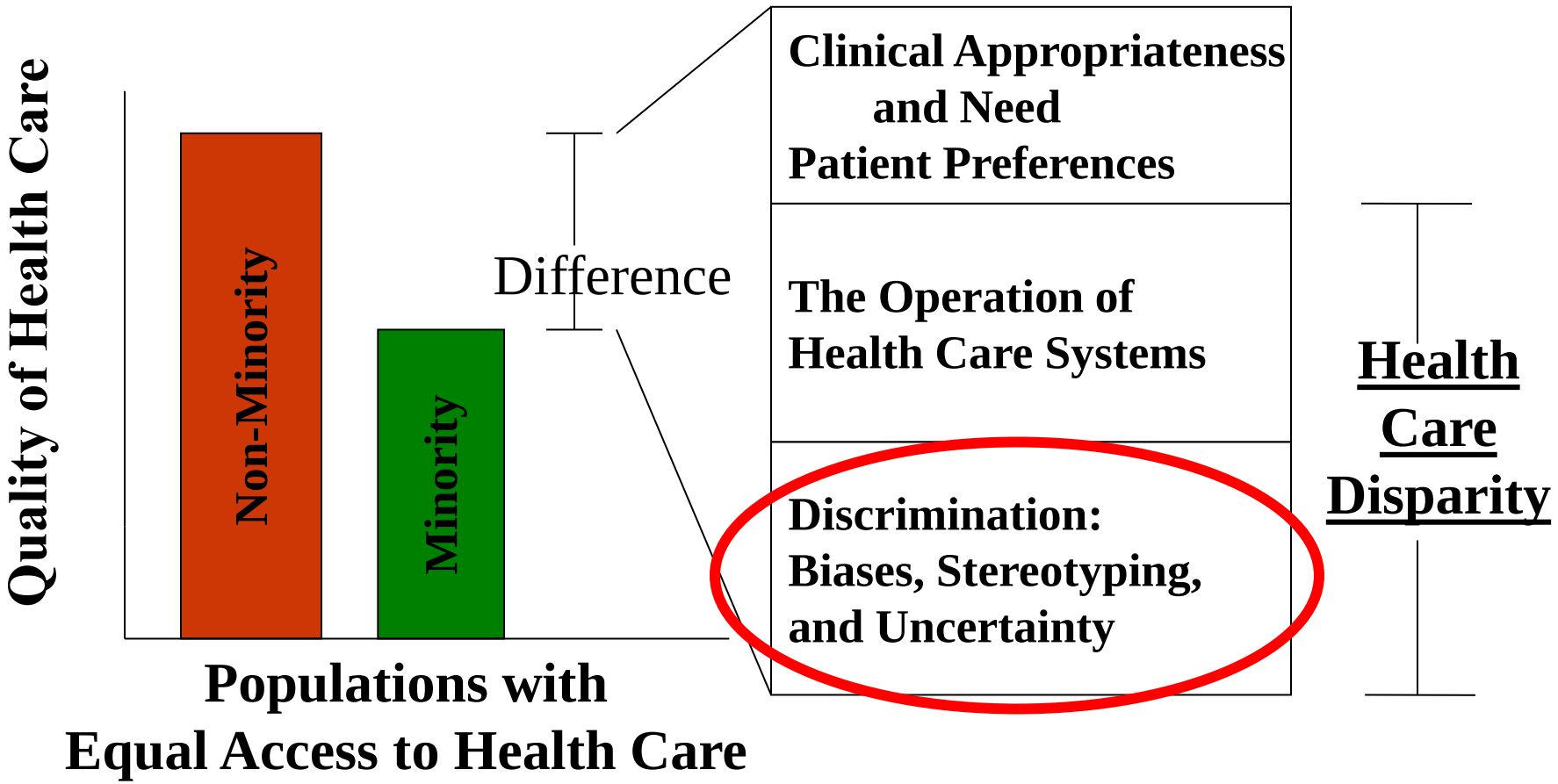
Karliner, LS. Health Serv Res, 2007.
Flores, G. Med Care Res Rev, 2005.

Substantial underuse of interpreters

- No national data
- In one study, only 70% of hospitals offered language services
- Studies of qualified interpreter use document low rates
  - 18% of ED patients (4 hospitals in Boston, 2008)
  - 54% of patients undergoing inpatient informed consent (1 hospital in San Francisco, 2017)
  - 29% of office based MDs reported using professional interpreters “often”; 40% reported “never” (National data, 273,000 MDs)
- Multiple patient studies reports underuse of qualified interpreters

Shiaffino. Health Affairs, 2016.
Ginde. Patient Educ Couns, 2010.
Lee. JGIM, 2017.
Schulson. JGIM, 2020.

What explains healthcare disparities?



Gomes and McGuire, 2001.

Bias against immigrants

- Clinicians are forthcoming about not using interpreters
  - ‘hassle factor”
  - “not crucial to advance care”
  - “probably not fair”
  - “use in important situations”


The New York Times

DOCTOR AND PATIENT

When the Patient Gets Lost in Translation

Sean Justice/Getty Images

By PAULINE W. CHEN, M.D.
Published: April 23, 2009

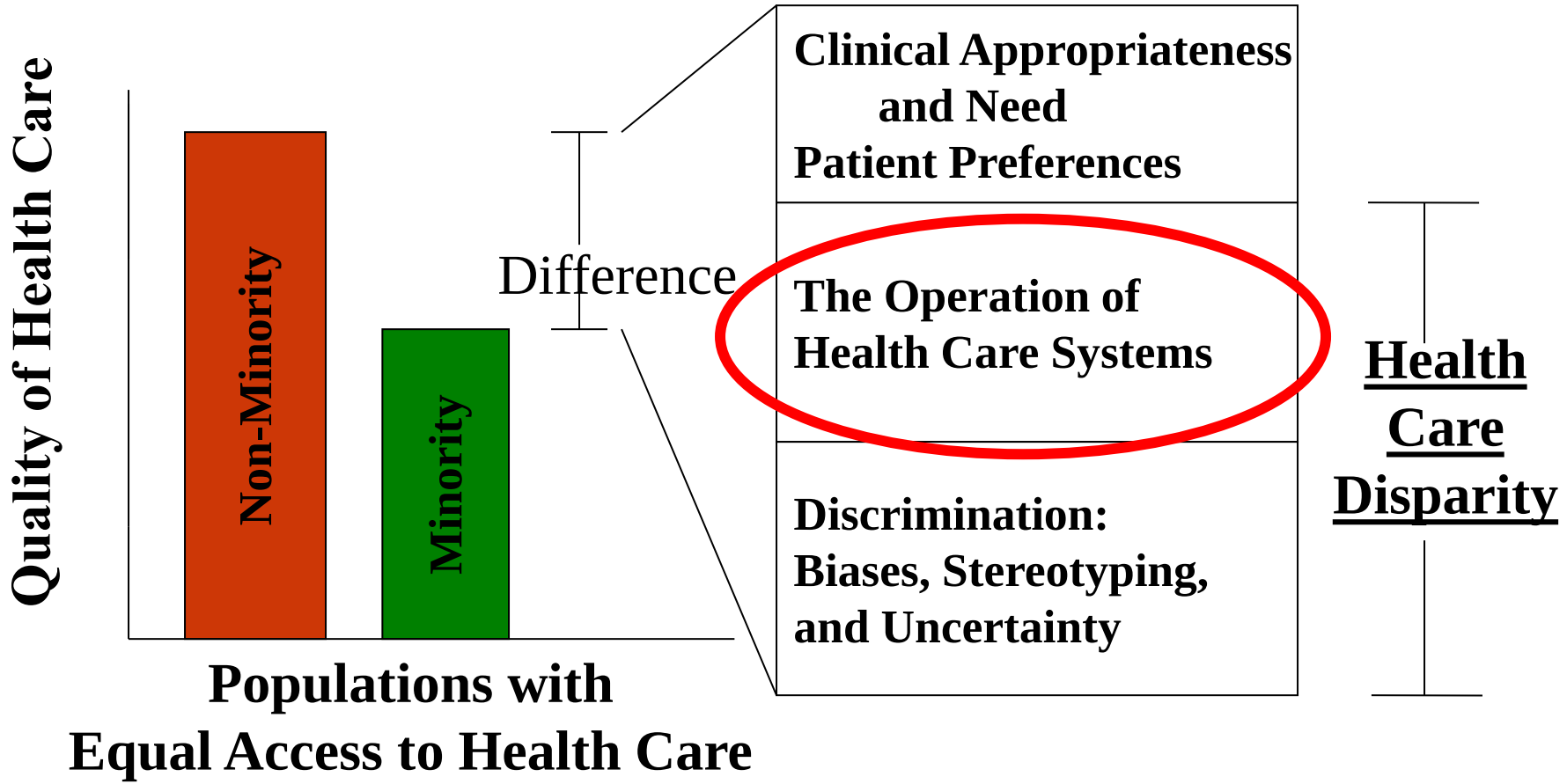
TWITTER

- “Getting by” is acceptable shortcut. Premised implicitly on patients being less valued

- Lack of interpreter access/infrastructure >>> **structural racism in healthcare**

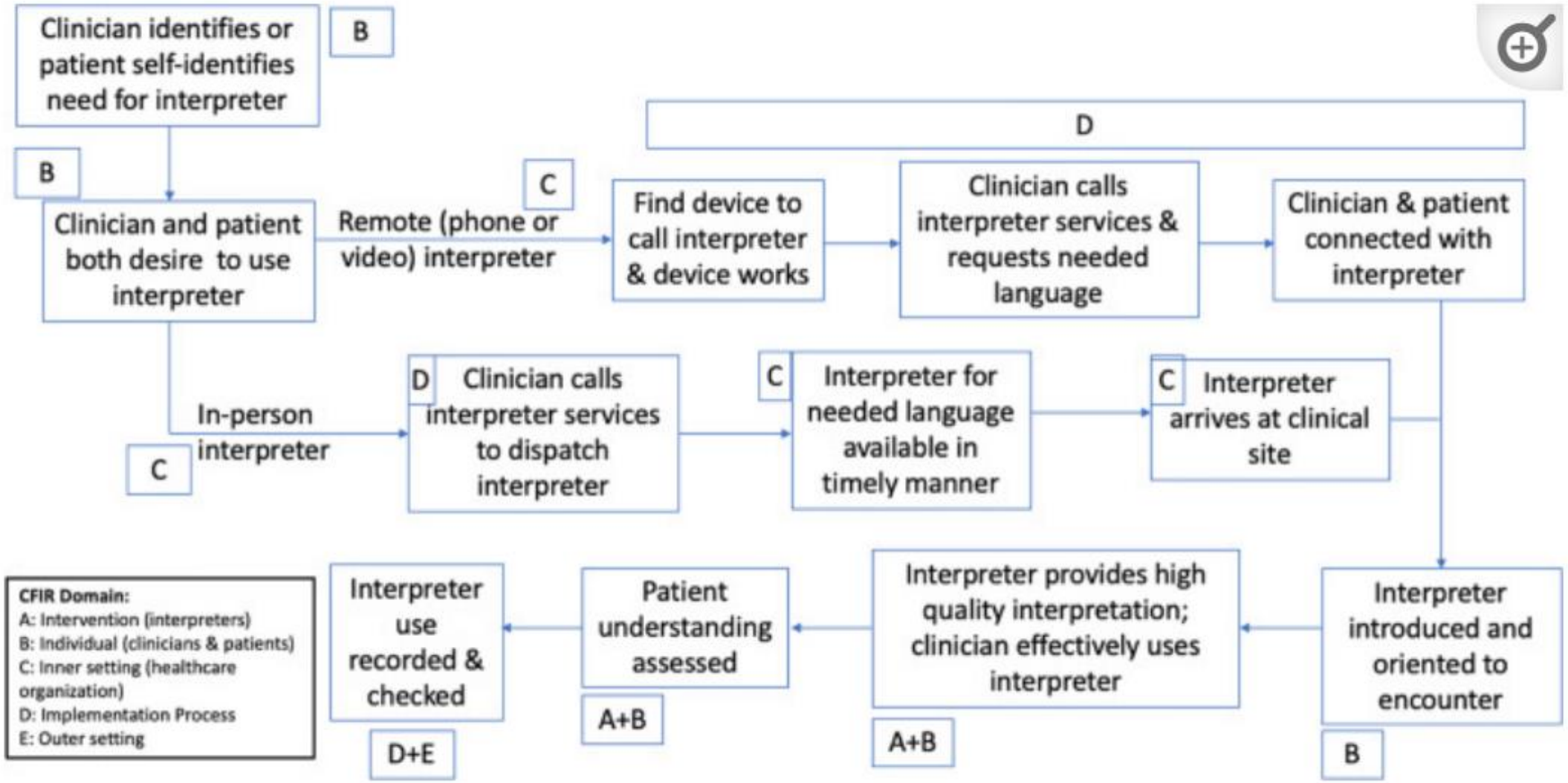
Diamond/Fernandez. JGIM, 2009.
Tang/Fernandez. J Health Care Poor Underserved, 2014.

What explains healthcare disparities?



Gomes and McGuire, 2001.

Journey map of pathway to using an interpreter with an LEP patient



Khoong/Fernandez. JGIM, 2021.

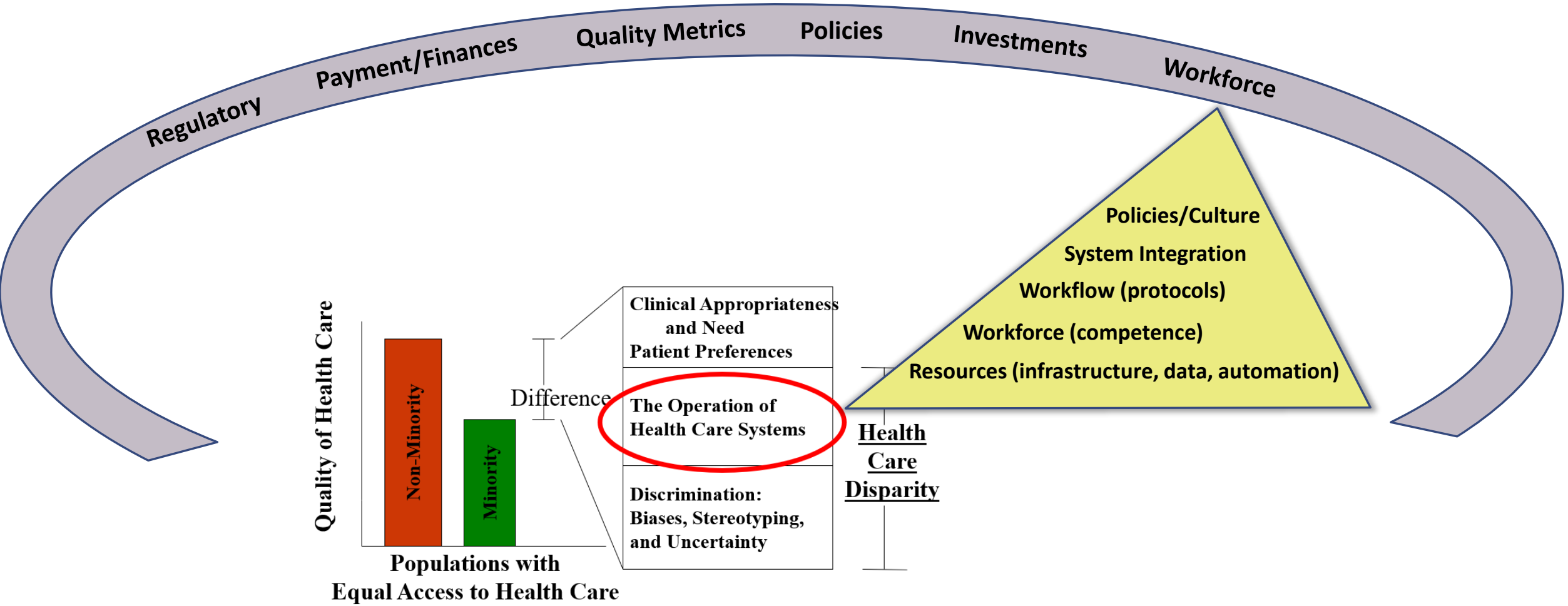
The operations of the healthcare system

- Multiple factors: Interpreters / Clinicians and Patients / Healthcare organizations/ Process for implementing interpreters / External influencers
- Interventions that focus solely on educating clinicians to use interpreters have failed
- Interventions that have substantially increased interpreter use are multimodal
  - EMR data on patient language preference
  - Capturing interpreter use in clinical record
  - Improving access to language concordant clinicians
  - Ease of access to interpretation infrastructure (phone, video, in-person)
  - Adequate leadership and funding
  - Clear policies

Taira. The Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety. 2019.
Regenstein. J Healthc Qual, 2012.

External to healthcare organization

- Regulatory policies
- Regulatory audits
- Development of digital tools that ease interpreter access, request, documentation
- Digital tools that automate auditing of adherence to policies
- Financial incentives (or sticks) for appropriate use (failure)
- Infrastructure funding akin to EMR funding
- Educational requirements/certification of skills
- Linguistically and culturally diverse workforce



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