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Health education and promotion a means for addressing Health challenges in Nigeria

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Abstract

There is an urgent need to continuously promote and deliver health education in the midst of several challenges faced in Nigeria. Good quality health is an index for national development, as it is believed that a Nation's health is directly proportional to a Nation's wealth as health is wealth. Therefore delivering qualitative health education is same as empowering citizens on wealth creation and healthy living which pertinent and key to sustainable development. The paper focuses on current challenges in the Nigerian economy and emphasizes on novel ways in which health education could be used as a solving tool to these challenges and how it could be continuously promoted and delivered despite this emerging challenges. The paper sees health education and promotion as critical to the development of lasting solutions to the Nation's challenges and the achievement of sustainable developmental goals. It further explains that national challenges such as insecurity, COVID-19 pandemic, environmental pollution and hazards, drug abuse, overpopulation, endemic diseases and outbreaks such as malaria, cholera, other food and water borne diseases and life threatening diseases such as HIV/AIDS, cancer among others, can be tackled and if not, eradicated completely through adequate and continuous emphasis on health education and promotion.

Keywords: Health, Education, Strategies, Sustainable development, Insecurity, COVID 19

INTRODUCTION

One of the significant natural resource of a nation is the overall health status of her citizen. Good quality health is a fundamental human right and an index for national development, as it is believed that a Nation's health is directly proportional to a Nation's wealth as health is wealth. As a matter of fact delivering qualitative health education is same as empowering citizens on wealth creation and healthy living which pertinent and key to sustainable development.

The World Health Organization (WHO) see health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 1958). The health of a society influences the productive potential and prosperity of its citizens. Education on the other hand simply means changing the behavioral pattern of an individual. It is a potent agent of change in any society and the vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, skills and values from one generation to another.

Health education has demonstrated pertinent roles in ensuring total wellbeing of an individual through knowledge acquisition, practical skills and positive behavioral change towards healthful living. Ajala (2002) stated that health education is the sole channel required to fill in the gap between scientific discoveries and man's application of these discoveries into reality. Health education is defined as any combination of learning experiences prepared to enable or assist individuals and communities improve their health and make quality health decisions through enhancement in knowledge, skills and attitudes (Johnson, 2010).

Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs (UN, 1987). Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serves as the blue prints to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Out

of the 52 ranked countries on the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Nigeria was ranked 43rd. On the sub-continental level, Nigeria sits in 14th place of the 15 nations in West Africa (Ihenko and Joseph, 2020).

In Nigeria today, health instruction have been emphasized at all levels of education and made possible through teaching and sensitizing people in schools on methods of prevention and control of diseases as well as the essence of healthy living, this was because schools were considered excellent places among all organized institutions due to the large mass, diverse age groups and also school serves as the widest and deepest channel for placing information at the disposal of the citizens (Rimande-Joel and Obiechina, 2021). However, this only goes to a fraction of the populace who are opportune to attend school. More so, the nation is currently facing challenges which threatens the operation of schools such as the insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic, as all these pose a question of how health education and promotion could be continuously served to the populace in order to achieve these sustainable development goals (SDGs) despite these challenges. And the fact that people need to be constantly and consciously aware of the health implications these challenges are bringing upon them.

Health education as a tool sustainable developmental challenges

Health education has a transformational role to play in addressing all health challenges in the post-2015 era, and this current health challenges are in line with the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), 6 (Clean water and sanitation), 7 (Affordable and clean energy), 12 (Responsible consumption and production), 13 (Climate action) and 14 (Life below water). They include;

Environmental hazards/pollution

Man and man-made activities have in turn adversely affect the natural environment which comprises of the soil, air and water. These adverse effect include, pollution of surface and groundwater sources through discharge untreated wastewater, open defecation, indiscriminate waste and refuse disposal, emission of harmful and toxic gases into the atmosphere from industries, vehicle exhausts etc. bush burning, deforestation, poaching of wildlife, illegal mining, gas flaring and damage to aquatic life. These in turn results to loss of diversity, green-house effect, ozone layer depletion and global warming (Fatubarin, 2014). However, many people involved in such practices are ignorant of the dangers these activities pose to them and the environment in the long run, as they are the fraction who do not attend school. So with the adequate health education both in school, the non-formal school systems and the local communities, citizens will learn to value their environment thereby preventing hazards and environmental pollution, which poses significant health risk.

Endemic diseases, Epidemic and pandemics

Diseases such as Covid-19, malaria, cholera and typhoid fever still poses significant threat to public health and accounts for several morbidities and mortalities worldwide (WHO, 2021) despite available therapies. There is no doubt that these diseases requires adequate preventive measures other cure, as prevention is said better than cure. Why do we have to spent huge amount of finances on drug research when we could always tackle the origin and cause of these diseases? This could be achieved through continuous health education and health promotion for citizens especially on the causes, transmission and ways prevention of these diseases. So the more people are aware about their health concerns, the better they are able to take appropriate measures in improving their

general hygienic conditions through understanding the essentials of personal hygiene and environmental sanitation hence, preventing the disease.

Health education also helps in correcting health misconception and prevents sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS which has no cure and no immunization. So the only way to prevent the spread is through health education not only school but in other informal and local environs, this will help reduce morbidities and mortalities. Problems of teenage pregnancy and early parenthood are all concerns of health education. Teenage pregnancy and early parenthood result in abandoning education thereby depriving the society of needed manpower.

Malnutrition

Malnutrition is the underlying cause of morbidity and mortality of a significant proportion of children under age five (5) in Nigeria, accounting for more than 50% of deaths (Rimande-Joel and Obiechina, 2021). Good nutrition enables citizens to be healthy, improve mental health because the brain cells are well nourished and physical energy needed for manpower is acquired. Exercise reduces obesity, cardio-vascular/heart disease, and hypertension etc. So therefore citizens not only schools need to be properly oriented and re-oriented on adequate balance diet, its health benefits and the adverse conditions in which malnutrition might have on the body.

Drug Abuse

Drug abuse has become the other of the day, and are emerging global concerns which places a significant threat to the social and health fabrics of families, society and the entire nation. The increase in drug abuse has led to a corresponding increase in violence, crimes and diseases such as hepatitis and HIV/AIDS (Oshodi *et al.*, 2010). This drugs interfere with human behavior, nervous system and our intellectuals. Tobacco use can cause hypertension, cardio-vascular heart

disease, respiratory tract infection and impaired physical exercise etc. Indian hemp smoking and cocaine use can induce psychosis and result in impaired learning. It alters the physical, mental and social development of individuals. Therefore there is need for health education and awareness to be geared towards factual information and sensitization on the health implications of drug abuse, drug problems and trafficking and also the involvement of drug agencies, community groups, youth leaders, religious and traditional leaders and voluntary organizations to enlightened people and join the fight against drug abuse.

Overpopulation

The role of health education and promotion in controlling overpopulation comes in through family planning and reproductive health as natality (child birth) control is key to managing an outburst population in any nation. Through health education across all settings in the society, citizens can become aware of the menace attached to having a population above the available resources. More so, parents could be more conscious of child bearing when they do not have the enough resources or capacity to cater for them, thereby promoting sustainable development.

Food and water security

Food quality and safety are important and essential consumer requirements. Food handling personnel play an important role in ensuring food safety throughout production, storage, and consumption. The World Health Organization outlined the golden rules to ensure the safety of food when being processed. Despite these set standards, the number of reported outbreaks of food-borne illnesses has been high, both in developed as well as developing countries (WHO, 2002). However, in developing countries like Nigeria, the problem is exacerbated due to ignorant, poor hygienic practices, poverty, the lack of adequate health care facilities and orientation regarding

food-borne diseases (Simon, 2007). Therefore, proper enlightenment of food handlers, vendors, market sellers etc. through health education becomes paramount. Ansari and Khan, (2012) also reported that food vendors India improved in their food hygiene practices after health education intervention. Evert *et al.* (2021) also reported that the improvement in the hygienic practices of food vendors in their study was due to health education intervention.

Water borne illnesses continues to possess global threat to public health. In Nigeria an estimated 63 million people lack access to an improved source of drinking water, and about 100 million people do not have access to basic facilities for sanitation and hygiene, more so 12% of the population practice open defecation which pollutes water sources (WHO, 2015). The absence of awareness on hygienic practices, poor sanitation and safety measures of drinking water treatment such as boiling, chlorination etc. seems to be the culprit here.

Cancer and carcinogens

Cancer is a life threatening disease characterized by uncontrolled growth of abnormal or malignant cells in the body. Carcinogen are chemical or physical agents that has the ability to cause cancer in individuals expose to them. They work by interacting with the human cell and inducing genetic mutations. Many genetically modified food and fruits contains carcinogenic substances which could cause abnormalities or cancer in humans, as a matter of fact frozen meats, chickens, turkeys and cabbages imported into the country are embalmed with cancerous agents known as formaldehyde, and individuals exposed to this agent are at high risk of leukemia and brain cancer (NCI, 2013).

In Nigeria today fruit vendors' uses calcium carbide and ethylene to ripen fruits such as banana, mangoes, pawpaw, oranges among others and this in turn could results in the development of

cancerous cells in consumers. Carbide reduces oxygen in brain and could lead to seizures, dizziness or coma (Adekalu *et al.*, 2020).

Farmers also need to be oriented and re-oriented on the use of sewage and wastewater in irrigation of crops especially vegetables which could directly absorb some heavy metals and chemicals from such water and ingested by humans. More so, quantities of pesticide and other agrochemicals used in the farms are not in agreement with the quantities recommended by Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC, 1999) and this results in having residues higher than recommended limits which pose a serious health implication to man.

Also fishes and other aquatic life are also capable of absorbing heavy metals or toxic chemicals into their body resulting from water pollution and untreated wastewater discharge by many chemical industries. Health education and promotion therefore need to be channeled towards creating awareness on the dangers of these foods and to enlighten citizens to consume only fresh foods and food products other than chemically preserved or genetically induced ones which could be cancerous to their health.

Insecurity

Insecurity is a state of being subjected to fear, threat, danger, molestation, intimidation or harassment (Amina, 2021) and this leaves many people traumatized, some suffer anxiety, depression, heart attack or cardiac arrest among others. As a matter of fact, a lot of people die helplessly in situations when there is bomb explosion, killings, bleeding resulting from gun-shots, injury/wounds or cuts. As a result of these people need to be enlightened on how to save lives when the need arises. There is an urgent need to educate and train citizens on healthy lifestyles and more importantly the first

aid precautions needed to be taken in scenarios when such conditions arises, and this could be achieved through health education and promotion in all settings of the society.

Strategic ways of enhancing health education to attain SDGs

Leveraging on community health workers

Ogbonna *et al.* (2016) opined that awareness is better created through community health education among women, youths, trade unions, market places, local or grass root institutions. Thus, non-formal community education deserves very special attention in view of its huge potentials in making community members responsive to health transformation. These health workers would move from house-to-house to provide first aid care and health education to community members, so that citizens get the right health information and make informed health decisions. Community health education can therefore be a panacea for achieving good health and well-being which is the third Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria.

Vicarious Teaching

Vicarious teaching strategies involve the use of media, devices or appliances such as television, radio, film, slides, transparencies, tape records etc. Here learners view or listen to presentation on health instructions through these appliances be it a programmed radio or television broadcast in regards to any current health related issue. Vicarious teaching actively involve learners in the learning process using various senses simultaneously (Okueso and Akinwusi, 2011). It can be effectively used to also to help physically challenged individuals to also learn e.g. tape recorder for the blind, visual films for the deaf. It covers a wide range of audience and also keeps away the barrier of time of the day, weather condition or availability of space. Although it might be

expensive, however, citizens will have more clarity and concretize all abstract concepts regarding the health instruction.

Research survey and health surveillance

Community survey activities take the form of fact-finding interviews on health issues in the society. This strategy is more like a community outreach, here, health workers or volunteers find out the actual cause or problem of a particular health related issue and educate people. It also make it possible for learners to benefit from the opportunity they have to ask questions. This method is considered effective because it can also serve as an evaluative technique to assess if the desired change in health behavior of the people have been achieved.

Leverage on communication technology

There is a need for health instructions to stay up to date with the ever-changing technology. Information on emerging health issues could be continuously promoted and supplied through news coverage either on radio or television, soap operas, musical video, mobile phones, internet, signboards in strategic places, adverts, multimedia projectors/interface on streets, social media etc. This will get to diverse community groups including farmers, market women, and road transport workers, among others. For instance, in musical video, Musician can reinforce and promote health message through their song, while people are being entertained by the music, they are also being educated by the information contained in them. Ige (1995) opined that song is one of the best way for learners or people to retain information. Soap Operas is also strategy that could be effectively used to pass several health messages across a large audience; it is a melodramatic program or serial broadcast on radio and television talking about health issues or diseases such as HIV/AIDS, diabetes, cancer etc. This method can handle contemporary health issues in the society as it also

give room for feedback. The social media through the use of mobile phones is also a strategic platform for the dissemination of health related items, instructions, methods and issues.

Traditional and religious leaders as advocates

Traditional and religious leaders are highly respected and influential people in their communities. Their roles and responsibilities in their communities should transcend beyond traditional and religious affairs, as they can act as change agents in communicating key message about health to their community. According to Nigeria Health Watch, 25% of pregnant women go to local or faith institutions to give birth, accounting for 133 maternal deaths between May 2019 to May 2020, out of which 18 deaths occurred in faith-based institutions (Thelma and Aloysius, 2021).

Improving the standards of Nigeria's primary health centres (PHC)

The renaissance of PHC is key in achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC). According to the World Health Organization, adequate funding and scaling-up PHC interventions across low and middle-income countries could save 60 million lives and increase average life expectancy by 3.7 years by 2030 (WHO, 2021) . For PHCs to meet the required standard care, it should have skilled human resources, medicines, infrastructure, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, be easily accessible to the community, and deliver patient centered healthcare services.

Conclusion

Continuous emphasis on health education and promotion is therefore central to the attainment of certain SDGs and serves as a solving tool and a sure way to combat emerging health issues in Nigeria, however it need to be adequately enhanced and effectively delivered using these strategic methods so as to cover the whole population and meet up with the current challenges faced by the nation.

Recommendations

Nevertheless, for health education and promotion to be enhanced and effectively delivered the paper suggest that:

- ✓ Emphasis on health education should not be confined to schools alone but also should cut across diverse group of people in either informal settings, rural or urban centres.
- ✓ Health education need to also level up and revolve around the ever-changing technology so as to be easily delivered among the populace.
- ✓ Government at all level should ensure continuous promotion of health education through adequate funding, capacity building and awareness and sensitization campaign not only when there is an epidemic or pandemic but prior to unforeseen circumstances.
- ✓ Health parastatals should utilize health education and promotion as a sustainable tool for preventive medicine rather spending huge finance seeking for cure.
- ✓ Health education should be made readily available to citizens at no cost and citizens should embrace healthy lifestyles.

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