

ENHANCING ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE THROUGH LITERACY INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES IN NIGERIA RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This paper examined enhancing access to healthcare through literacy innovative strategies in Nigeria (rural communities). The paper examined the concept of literacy, health literacy, and the link between the two concepts. It looked into obstacles hindering people's access to healthcare, role of literacy in providing access to accessing healthcare and the literacy innovative strategies that could be used to enhance access to healthcare on the premise that adult literacy skills serve as basis and foundation for health literacy which in turn serve as key to accessing healthcare and healthy living in any given community. It was observed that adult literacy has been relegated for attaining health literacy forgetting that the reading, writing, computing skills will enable one to understand and communicate basic hygiene and health instruction, which enhances functionality of adult individual who is responsible for his entire household and their access to healthcare. The paper concludes that not until adult literacy innovatives are adequately explored, there will still be a serious setback in accessing and utilizing healthcare facilities in Nigeria. This will constitute a serious health hazard for Nigeria populace. Literacy innovative strategies was recommended by this research so as to make health care system attractive and accessible to rural dwellers in Nigeria.

Keywords: Healthcare, Access, Literacy, Health literacy and Literacy innovative

Introduction

Health prospects of an individual in communities are basically dependent on availability and access to healthcare, functional health literacy, cognitive awareness and available health information at their disposal (Nutbeam, 2008). In spite of culture, education, behavioural skills and socio-economic factors play significant roles in life of an individual within communities, access to health care remain the only way to improve healthy living and individuals quality of life with resultant increase in the growth of their communities as well as their nations economic, social, political development.

It is a common notion and general belief that health is wealth. Sound health is thus fundamentally required for living a socially and economically productive life, as poor health inflicts great hardships on households, including debilitation, substantial monetary expenditures, loss of labour and sometimes death (Omonona, Obisesan and Aromolaran, 2015). The health status of adults equally affects their household welfare, including the children (Asenso-Okyere, 2011). Health care thus form the foundation for production and creation of wealth (Sunny, Etemike and Nwachukwu, 2015). To this end, to be healthy thus requires individual's access to quality healthcare, services and provisions. These include availability of health facilities, equipments and personnel/practitioners within a reasonable and hardship free distance (Ajilomo and Oluyimin, 2007). Thus, this study examines the importance

and the roles of using literacy innovative strategies in providing access to healthcare services to the over 65% Nigerians living in various rural communities and with over 30% residing in cities (National Literacy Survey, 2010).

The Concept of Literacy

The concept of literacy is been misunderstood by some to mean only reading and writing by adults who are illiterate. However, it goes beyond acquiring basic reading and writing skills by illiterate adults to acquiring skills for reading, writing in both mother's tongue and English language and been functional in the society. National Institute for Literacy (2008), provided a comprehensive working definition of literacy as thus; "an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society. This implies that literacy is more than reading and writing alone. It encompasses all educational efforts made to make an individual useful to himself and the society. The functional element of it makes it innovative, being useful in diverse fields and especially in accessing healthcare.

A number of scholars have viewed functional literacy healthcare from the perspective of patients' interactions in the health care setting, the disenfranchisement of some patients because of their low literacy skills, the difficulty some patients have in navigating the health care system, the quality of the communication between doctors and

their patients including the cultural overlay of such exchanges, and ultimately the effect of low literacy on health outcomes. (National institute for Literacy ,2010)

Health Literacy Phenomena

Health literacy is not just about how to read and write health information but the ability to understand, act and make use of health information adequately and effectively (McCRAy, 2005; Lee, Tsai, Tsai and Kuo, 2010). It is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions (Institute of Medicine, 2002). This cannot be outrightly isolated from patients' literacy levels and the readability of materials intended for use by those patients and it is time bound because using health information timely has a lot of advantages like prevention of illness and diseases, timely cure of illness and diseases as well as reduction in cost of healthcare services and poor health outcome.

In spite of the interactive literacy which involves more advanced cognitive and social skills that allow an individual to extract and derive meaning and to apply new information to changing circumstances, critical literacy involves the advanced cognitive skills to critically analyze information and use this information to exert greater control over life's situations which some scholar like Weiss (2001), Rudd, Kirsch, and Yamamoto (2004) and Nutbeam (2008) among others believe to be what health literacy stands for. Adult literacy still serves as foundation of it all as, administration of drugs and access to healthcare service will require a measure of enlightenment of most of adult population to guide their children and dependants appropriately in the area of their use.

Today, health literacy is one of the emerging and pressing global issues in healthcare system and delivery (Lee et al., 2010). It encompasses making health information available and accessible to everyone irrespective of their educational level and the individual been able to use the information made available to him/her on time for healthy living. This is however bedeviled in Nigeria with the high rate of illiteracy that cut across all ages but more prevalent among the adults with the larger percentage living in rural areas as, health literacy partly depends on adult basic reading and writing skills which brings about functionality in their everyday living (McCRAy, 2005; National Literacy Survey, 2010).

Communicating health information to adult illiterates in multi ethnic Nigerians communities with diverse languages and dialects is not an easy task. It requires numerous efforts like having interpreters as well as literate fellow to read prescriptions to adult illiterates on when and how to take medicines. This in no small means

constitute a clog in the effort of the Nigerian government making healthcare accessible to its citizens and health services delivery within the country especially, in the rural communities as this leads to reluctance to work, in-effectiveness and in-efficiency on the part of the workers (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc. (ECCV, 2012). This problem is not only limited to Nigeria or African countries alone, but to all people in the world. The United States one time Surgeon General, Richard Carmona, once hinged public health preparedness, health care disparities, and prevention as well as health successes on 'health literacy'. In his words, "Today, low health literacy is a threat to the health and well-being of Americans and to the health and well-being of the American medical system." This is pointing to the fact that 'illiteracy' in health care provision could jeopardise efforts on healthcare system. Therefore, promoting a health literate society will aid access to healthcare but this cannot be made possible without the actual basic/functional and adult literacy strategies especially in an illiteracy dominated country like Nigeria. ECCV, (2012) attested to this in its report when it affirmed that "Health literacy is a broad skill that often requires the simultaneous use of other literacy skill types, such as prose and document literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills" Hence, the need for literacy innovative strategies in creating access to healthcare in Nigeria.

Literacy and access to healthcare delivery system

Access to healthcare refers to the ability of an individual or community to obtain healthcare services with ease (Okafor, 1984; Aregbeyen, 1992; Ajilomo and Oluyimin, 2007, Efe, 2013). Access to healthcare is multidimensional. It involves the availability of health facilities, the quality of care, geographical accessibility- distance, availability of the right type of care and services, financial accessibility, and acceptability of service (Peters et al., 2008). The utilization of healthcare services is related to the literacy level of individual and community, availability of facilities, quality and cost of services, as well as socio-economic structure, and personal characteristics of the users (Chakraborty et al., 2003; Manzoor et al., 2009; Onah et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2010; Haun et al., 2015; Omonona, Obisesan, and Aromolaran, 2015).

Accessing and navigating today's health care system requires a high literacy building capacity. Patients need to interact with a number of sections in healthcare settings as well as health related information. These according to McCRAy (2005) include doctors' note/prescription, clinics and hospitals therapeutic instructions, patient education materials, prescriptions, bills, and insurance forms. An adult is saddled with his health responsibilities and that of his young ones. Adult literacy education according to Oyebamiji and Amini-Philip (2012) creates effective awareness on

diseases. This is also attested to by Nwabuko (2006) by pointing to one of the most fundamental causes of HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases to be lack of information by patients. Therefore, educating parents who are adults through literacy innovatives such as education for living and community health education on health issues can help the process of coping with the health responsibility of adults and parents as well as accessing the healthcare for the general well being of the Nigerian populace.

The relationship between literacy and access to healthcare is further stressed by the need for patients to effectively communicate their health status and problems within the healthcare. Literacy comes with high level of effective communication opportunities for well being especially in a multi ethnic nation like Nigeria with over 250 languages and dialects. Difficulties in adults expression of their health problems creates barrier between patients and healthcare provisions. Seeking secondary and tertiary medical healthcare which are not within the reach of larger population of adult and their children/wards in Nigeria requires literacy for direction and ease transportation. Thus, literacy innovative strategies would serve as guide in helping illiterate adults in rural areas.

Access contenders of healthcare delivery system in Nigeria

Healthcare delivery system has its network in all states of the federation in Nigeria especially in the remote setting through the basic primary healthcare services. As much as the government is making effort to reach the grassroot with her healthcare delivery services, most rural and even urban settlers are still finding it difficult to access these facilities due to their inability to interact, comprehend and interpret simple healthcare instructions and prescriptions among other factors.

Illiteracy: Illiteracy is not only problem to accessibility of healthcare, it is equally a problem to choice and decision making on health issues especially by rural dwellers. Several authors and researchers have written on the importance of literacy to health. Omonona et al. (2015, submitted) that the level of education and literacy informs individual choices on healthcare. Lee et al., (2010) averred that literacy (adult literacy) is foundational to health literacy. Therefore, illiteracy creates barrier and obstacle in accessing and utilizing healthcare.

Distance: Distance constitutes one of the major determinant factors in an individual and community accessibility to healthcare services. The farther or nearer of a health facility to individual household plays paramount role in physical accessibility of such health facility (Aregbeyen, 1992 in Efe, 2013). Therefore, the concentration of health facilities in the cities and semi cities constitute

barrier in accessing healthcare in Nigeria where larger population reside in the rural communities.

Mal-distributions of health facilities and equipments: The mal – distribution of healthcare facilities in Nigeria can be traced to the abysmal development of National Health development plan. The tertiary and secondary health facilities which have equipments for diagnosis and better treatments are housed by cities and big towns respectively, which make it far and in- accessible to a large Nigerian population who mostly are rural dwellers (Sunny, Etemike and Nwachukwu, 2015). The primary health care facilities lack equipments to work with, lack infrastructures and are ill-staffed. The tertiary and secondary health facilities also suffer a degree of these problems in Nigeria (Olayiwola, 1990; Aluko-Arowolo, 2005; Ajilowo and Olujimi, 2007).

Inadequate health personnel: The mal – distribution of health personal and worker in Nigeria is not isolated from mal- distribution of health facilities resultant from National Health development plan. This also affects the rural health workers who are to make healthcare accessible to rural dwellers. The needed training and retraining of these health workers is also inadequate. This is further heightened by the effect of manpower shortage of specialist in the labour market. The health care providers in the rural areas are not only a few but have been deprived of instrument of labour and means of labour (Sunny, Etemike and Nwachukwu, 2015). As a result of this menace, Nigerian access to health care is at risk and been denied.

Exploring Literacy Innovative Strategies in accessing quality healthcare

Literacy is not alone; it is an integral part of adult education. Adult education as a discipline has a wider scope covering and housing a number of educational innovatives such as basic/ functional literacy, continuing education, women education, community education, industrial education, social welfare, community development, non-formal education programmes like skill acquisition and others. These adult literacy education programmes are the innovative strategies that have the capacity of creating awareness and enlightenment to people with inadequate access to health are in Nigeria.

Adult/Youth Literacy: There are large number of both adults and young who are completely illiterate in Nigerian communities. National literacy survey, (2010) put their percentage at about 24% in youth and 42.1 % in adults. Parker (2000) also affirmed that literacy level in Nigeria is low and has been contributing to poor health outcomes in communities. By implication, the percentage of illiteracy among the youths is likely to be above 24% and this is bad omen for access to healthcare as illiteracy is one of the highest problems confronting healthcare system all over the world

and especially in Africa. Therefore, adult and youth literacy through adult literacy education possesses the potentials of making this population literate. That is, equip them with reading and writing skills as well as functional literacy which will make them able to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. Reading of prescriptions, health hand bills, poster, and understanding of health sensitization messages from local newspaper, radio and television programmes along side time as well as being able to communicate effectively with health personnel/practitioner. Adult literacy education innovation and initiative is capable of achieving this if effectively explored.

Continuing Education: Continuing education provides access to learners to maintain to junior secondary school level of basic education or further prepare them to sit for public examination such as WASC, GCE, NECO among others which qualify them for admissions into tertiary educational institutions. (Paiko, 2010). Through remedial studies and distance learning which are forms of continuing education, adult learners are exposed to emerging issues and problems in health sector and how to manage health problems especially in the rural areas. Continuing education gives opportunity to everyone to update his/her knowledge on health status, how to prevent illness and disease and also develop in learners basic skills needed for accessing health-related services.

Women Education: Women education is an emerging field that is getting more attention in the world over due to issues of gender inequality and disparity as well as various problems predominant among womenfolk. Health literacy which is embedded in women education will boost women health knowledge, preventive behaviour, ability to navigate the healthcare system, and ability to care for her children. Interventions to increase a woman's health literacy include written education materials with proper reading level and design, clear communication, and education to increase health knowledge, self efficacy and self advocacy skills.

Community Education:

Community education comprises of all the instructional activities put in place by community change agents in conjunction with the community people to better the lots of the rural dwellers in so many areas including community health literacy. Community health education assistants who make health information available and accessible for the community UNESCO (2009) confirmed that about 16 per cent of the world's adult population lack basic literacy skills. About two-thirds of these are women and this population could be adequately reached through health fair, health talks, and health literacy which are handled by health extension officers. These platforms brings primary health

services closer to the community people and enlightens them on health related issues which enhances their access to it.

Social welfare:

Social welfare generally devotes the full range of organized activities of voluntary and governmental agencies that seek to prevent, alleviate, or contribute to the solution of recognized social problem, or to improve the well-being of individuals, groups, or communities (NASOW, 1971). The professionals in this field (social workers), help the society through social welfare agencies to remediate and prevent seemingly social health issues from culminating into illness which may threaten the lives of their clientele.

These agencies are accessible to members of the public for counseling and other psycho-therapy treatment which will enlighten the community people about their health status and threats.

Community Development:

Community development revolves round the principle of self help. This initiative encourages community people to rally round themselves to put in place a worthwhile project will benefit the whole community and bring about overall development of their community. One of the most desired project by communities is health centre which will cater for their health issues at the community level. Primary healthcare centre through communal efforts will go a long way in making healthcare service accessible to the grassroot people.

The above are literacy innovative strategies which are common and accessible to the rural dwellers and urban people as well, these initiatives are advocates of health literacy. Through this strategies, it become easier for people generally to access healthcare services particularly in rural communities. Medical and health is one of the five systems of social services erstwhile called social welfare, others are; education, housing, income maintenance and personal welfare.

Roles of Literacy Innovative in Enhancing Access to Healthcare service in Nigeria

Literacy provides a number of important roles and function in accessing health care in all communities. These roles include;

- Equipping citizenry with needed health literacy that enables them obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.
- It gives and equips adult illiterates with needed reading and writing potentials that served as basis for having and acquiring the needed health literacy.
- It enhances effective communications between the patients and health practitioners
- It helps patients to understand every prescription as well as usage of drugs, in

terms dosage and time intervals when the prescribed drugs are to be taken.

- It educates the community people against the background of some cultural beliefs and practices that negates the use of health facilities and drugs as well as vaccines.
- It reduces cultural communal behaviours that hamper healthy living
- It gives information to patient on the available healthcare and cost as well as location
- It prepares community people for self-help projects that enhance access to healthcare
- It educates the masses about government health policies that could alleviate their problems of access to healthcare such as health insurance policies
- It enhances the illiterates understanding the good of health programmes like immunization and vaccination programmes and not to injure them
- In a way, literacy innovative prevents and reduces death rate, improve health status through obtaining, processing and understand basic diet health information.
- Literacy innovative helps develop cultural responsiveness framework that serve as practical guide within the health care system as well develops a system that is responsive to people's needs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Sound health, healthy living, prevention and control of diseases and illness as well as productivity and development is highly dependent on access to healthcare, while the success of healthcare system also depend on the literacy level of individuals and communities on health issues as well as access and utilizing healthcare and facilities. Literacy has major roles to play in the general well being of man. For these roles to be properly played, the place of literacy innovative cannot be underplayed in access to healthcare for better and developed society. Literacy innovative needed to be properly explored to create a functional and responsive society to healthcare. Adult literacy programmes becomes germane to the process of accessing and utilizing health facilities in order to have healthy people and healthy nation. It is therefore necessary for all the tiers of government to make provision for all aspects of literacy that will facilitate access to healthcare in its multi-dimensional aspects. Based on the above, it is recommended that:

- There should be policy framework and provision for effective execution of all adult education literacy programmes to be able to cater for access to healthcare in its multi-dimensional aspects.
- The government should establish literacy centers in every Local Government Area in the country with adequate teaching and learning materials and qualified teachers to meet the work force requirement in both

formal and non-formal education institutes. The literacy Centres should be located closer to the people to promote the national literacy programmes in the country and improve accessibility and utilization of health facilities.

- There should be synergy between National Mass Education Commission responsible for adult literacy programmes and its agencies at state and local government level and Federal Ministry of health on provision of functional health literacy.

The three tiers of government must as a matter of urgency provide all the needed facilities, finance and support for the improved adult literacy programmes in the rural area. This will be needed to bring adult literacy and health literacy to all and sundry without any tribal or geographical disparity.

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