

**CREATING AWARENESS ON PUBLIC HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
AMONG RURAL DWELLERS IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Providing public health and well-being in rural Cross River State, Nigeria, have been the concern of the government. This is because over the years, the rural people have been in the woods without awareness of the dangers inherent in unhealthy lifestyle or how to utilize the benefits of health and well-being. The rural dwellers have been seemingly overwhelmed by ignorance which has created several health challenges like overweight, hypertension, diabetes and maternal death. These conditions attract interest in creating awareness on public health and well-being among the people. The use of village announcers, next-door-neighbour or person-to-person method, family leaders, local schools and churches, NGOs, etc have been found to be useful imperatives for action. Although problems often exist that pose serious threat to the implementation of the programme, this paper recommends that these obstacles can be overcome by instilling confidence and love in the rural people; organizing local forums and literacy campaigns, as well as enduring pains in order to create effective awareness on public health and well-being in rural communities in Cross River State.

Keywords: Awareness, Public Health, Well-being, Rural dwellers.

Introduction

Cross River State is a coastal State in Nigeria which is located in the Niger Delta region. The State consist of eighteen Local Government Areas with a total population of 2,892,98.8 (National Population Commission, Abuja, 2006). A large part of the population predominantly occupies the rural areas with widespread traditional medical practices.

The word 'rural' is commonly associated with backwardness as compared to the developed urban cities. In Cross River State, as in most other States of the Federation, rural areas are predominantly poor and have the challenge of preventing diseases or controlling their spread through unhealthy effort due to ignorance. This condition has been attributed to lack of medical equipment, and absence of diagnostic laboratories that characterizes the urban areas. In addition, lack of good sanitary and hygienic conditions, among rural dwellers, poses threat to public health and well-being in the State.

In most cases during the year, there are no organized public health enlightenment campaigns and sensitization on health matter that are common in urban areas. The use of radio, television, global systems mobile telecommunications (GSM) as major instruments for creating awareness on public health and well-being are virtually lacking in the rural areas. Consequently, this situation creates the problem of participation in most government health programmes as the rural areas become isolated in the planning and implementation of these programmes.

The term health is perceived differently by the rural people. To some, the term refers to the ability to feel good and get up early in the morning to prepare for farm work. To many others, health refers to the ability to have good appetite for food or drinks. Generally, the concept of health has both psychological and physiological connotations. It is psychological in the sense that one can actually observe when an individual is sick. We can observe the changes in the behaviour of a sick person. On the other hand, it is physiological suggesting that an individual actually suffers from an ailment which hinders the normal functioning of the human body and for which diagnosis is required for curative and subsequent preventive and rehabilitative treatment.

Over the years, due to lack of awareness on public health and well-being, majority of the rural dwellers relied heavily on the psychological approach to health. This explains the reason why most of them resort to the use of Traditional Birth Attendants, local surgeons, herbalists, bone setters, etc, that they consider cheap and near. This social condition underscores the imperatives for creating awareness on public health and well-being as panacea for ignorance and diseases.

In recent years, the Cross River State Government embarked upon several health programmes covering areas like immunization, maternal and child health, HIV prevention, control of malaria through house-to-house distribution of Long Lasting Insecticide Treated Nets (LLITNs), etc. These programmes were mostly targeted at the rural poor but their successes depended heavily on creating awareness to enhance community or village participation. Unfortunately, the vision and expectations of the government and other Donor Agencies failed due to lack of proper awareness and participation among the rural people.

Therefore, in view of these problems that often result in high morbidity and mortality rate, this study is aimed at analyzing these problems and highlighting the way forward to creating awareness on public health and well-being among rural dwellers in Cross River State.

Health challenges caused by Ignorance

Ignorance is the bane of public health and well-being among rural dwellers in Cross River State. It has led to frequent deaths of women of child bearing age who, at critical moments, are referred to the Teaching Hospital after self-medication and harmful traditional practices had failed. In a study of the causes of Maternal Death in China, Zhang and Ding opined that haemorrhage (a preventable health challenge) caused about 60 percent of maternal deaths in rural areas. Other health challenges like ruptured uterus and eclampsia (also preventable) results in maternal death due to ignorance. It has been observed that most pregnant women, referred to Teaching Hospital from Traditional Birth Attendants or Prayer Houses, often die shortly after admission (Ihejiamaizu, 2002). Recently, due to ignorance among rural dwellers in Cross River State, the outbreak of cholera in communities like Yache and Agoi was attributed to the eating of mango.

Ignorance, as it relates to health, is two-prong: ignorance of healthy habits to adopt, and ignorance of the consequences of risky habits. One of the problems of our time is that ignorance makes people to adopt lifestyles that are deleterious to health. On the other hand, because of this challenge, individuals, groups or governments have introduced health education to promote sustainable healthy lifestyles as a means of promoting family and community well-being. Due to ignorance, people are increasingly becoming overweight and obese, with children being particularly vulnerable. The number of overweight children have tripled over the past decades; approximately, 17.0 percent of today's youths are overweight (Ogben et al, 1999-2004). The health consequences of obesity are devastating. However, if obesity remains unchecked, their lifestyle risk of being diagnosed with diabetes at some points in their lives is estimated at 30 percent for boys, and 40 percent for girls (Narayan et al, 2003). Obesity is also a major

contribution to heart diseases, arthritis and some types of cancer which rural dwellers may suffer due to ignorance. Annual deaths associated with obesity are estimated to be between 100,000 and 300,000 in the United State and worse in sub-Saharan Africa (Flegal et al, 2005). Ignorance of these health problems or health risk could lead to its underestimation or lack of awareness of effective utilization of available health care. It is for this purpose that school health education programmes are introduced by government to counter ignorance which for long had led to an increase in health risk behaviour like tobacco smoking, lack of physical exercise, abuse of drugs, alcohol intake, stress and injury. Research by the World Health Organization (WHO) has provided evidence which supports the idea that effective health education programmes should be intensified and priority given to the onset of the risky behaviour (WHO, 2007).

Effective health education is imperative in that in some rural areas, pit toilets are commonly dug close to streams that are often used as major source of water supply. It is a common practice that in most community farm roads, particularly in areas where natural streams are scarcely found, men and women bath in the same stream (only being separated by a locally made fence across the stream) with men on the upper side of the stream, while women take their bath down stream. Consequently, sicknesses and diseases become rampant and these health challenges, in most cases, are ignorantly attributed to nemesis as punishment for the sufferers' evil practices of the past.

In the light of the current wave of ignorance prevalent among rural dwellers in Cross River State, it is increasingly necessary to carry out this study to improve awareness on public health and well-being.

Conceptual clarification

It is important to define key concepts that are used in the study such as, awareness, public health and well-being. This will make the study to be well rooted and also ease understanding.

Awareness: The term awareness is a human condition that seeks to describe the transition from ignorance to knowledge, and in which an individual realizes the existence of an event, idea or time, etc. The essence of awareness is to create knowledge or draw attention. In rural Cross River State, majority of the people suffer from ignorance on public health and well-being. Since they are lagging behind in terms of knowledge and its existence, it is necessary to develop this idea through creating awareness or interest by several methods.

Public Health: The idea of public health is commonly associated with disease control or prevention. Winslow (1920, cited in Egwu, 1996) defined public health as follows:

“... the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health and efficiency through organized community effort for

- (a) the sanitation of the environment;
- (b) the control of the communicable infections;
- (c) the education of the individual in personal hygiene;
- (d) the organization of medical and nursing services for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of diseases; and
- (e) the development of the social machinery to insure everyone a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health, so organizing these benefits as to enable every citizen to realize his birth-right of health and longevity”

Well-being: The term well-being is related to welfare. It implies that there exists a need, interest, or value which requires satisfaction. People have different needs or interests which cover areas like health, old age, security, protection, etc. The idea of well-being therefore seeks to describe the aid that people require against the vicissitudes of life. It includes those things people choose to have so that they can improve their living conditions.

Determinant of Public Health and well-being

A number of factors exist and play dominant roles in determining public health and well-being in rural Cross River State. These are as follows:

Culture: The term culture describes the sum total of a people’s belief and practices. It constitutes a major determinant of health. Culture affects the rural dwellers in many ways. In some rural areas, children are forbidden from eating eggs or fish for fear of growing to become thieves. In a few communities, maiden girls are compelled to go through what may be described as “fattening room” where they are made to become fat signifying readiness to marry. In most rural areas, it is believed that the use of palm oil or exposure to the crushing heat of the sun causes malaria. Although this belief promotes rest on a sunny day, yet in these same communities, it is perceived that certain diseases or illness are caused by spirits or by witchcraft practices.

Habits and lifestyle: This is one of the determinants of health. It involves attitudes individuals choose to exhibit and which may sometimes be very difficult to curtail. Some of these habits include cigarette smoking, alcohol intake, sexual

promiscuity, biting of nails, etc. These habits and lifestyles are dangerous to health. For instance, sexual promiscuity may lead to death by Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), cigarette smoking may cause lung diseases or cancer. Alcohol intake may cause liver cirrhosis which can result in death.

Poverty: Poverty refers to the absence of economic well-being, ignorance or mental backwardness that gives no courage or voice. Poverty especially of knowledge has seriously affected the dietary intake of households in the rural areas. In some rural communities, certain food items, leaves, and animals are regarded as 'totemic' and therefore forbidden from being eaten. Mushroom for instance is forbidden in some communities despite its nutritional value. Poverty may also result in the inability of households to obtain a balanced diet. In some cases, particularly as a way of escape from reality, people resort to the use of hard drugs, excessive alcohol intake and cigarette smoking due to ignorance or mental poverty in order to temporarily forget their problems.

Heredity: This is a major determinant of family health which is associated with genes. Health experts maintained that certain ailments are inherited from family genes. Diseases like sickle cell anaemia, diabetes, and hypertension are usually passed from one generation to another through family genes and this determines family health history. This condition makes it imperative for frequent or regular genetic screening for proper check, control and health management of persons.

Environment: This is a determinant of health. Environmental pollution especially inhaling motorcycle or generator fumes may cause certain respiratory illness such as carbon monoxide toxicity, asthma or lung cancer. Environmental degradation like bush burning in villages may sometimes result in nutritional deficiency. In some cases, improper human faeces disposal as commonly found in riverine areas, may cause food poisoning. Typhoid fever, worm infection, schistosomiasis (which present as blood in urine) guinea worm infection, onchocerciasis (river blindness) are commonly caused by contaminated environment.

Mechanism for creating awareness on public Health and well-being There are several agencies, tools or methods that individuals, groups or government can utilize successfully to create awareness on public health and well-being among rural dwellers in Cross River State. These mechanisms are important and have been found to be effective in passing messages among the rural people. It can therefore be utilized as a useful instrument for successful planning and

implementation of health and well-being among rural communities in Cross River State.

Next-door-neighbour: This is the cheapest and most commonly used method among rural dweller. It is as old as human history. The process involve passing information on public health and well-being through the next-door-neighbour or person-to-person within the neighbourhood. The method is friendly and rural dwellers rely heavily on it since it is another way of expressing love and showing intimacy. It is believed that information handed to an individual by his next-door-neighbour is most reliable because people can check its validity by asking different questions in respect of the issue or matter under consideration.

Village Announcers: This is an ancient practice where an individual is appointed to perform the job of carrying information or news from one part of the village to the other. This information may be on defence, health, war, or festival activities, etc. The village announcer may use a whistle, bell or traditional drum to attract attention and passes the message to the people. Therefore, being a means of disseminating information to the rural people, it can also be a useful instrument for creating awareness on public health and well-being.

Village Assembly: The village Assembly constitutes one of the effective methods of sensitizing the rural people on public health and well-being. The Assembly consists of family heads and elders who are bond by kinship ties. The Village Assembly serves as an effective instrument in that it is an avenue where matters relating to the well-being of members are thoroughly discussed and decisions taken. In most cases, sufficient time is spent on deliberations and every member is given the opportunity to express himself. The process guarantees participation, and create a sense of awareness and belongingness which gives the people hope and esteem in the society (Ihejiamaizu, 2001)

Age Grade: The term age grade refers to a peer group or a body of people in the rural area who share common period of birth usually within the range of one to two years. It is sometimes overlapping. As a peer group, the age grade is an indispensable tool for creating awareness on public health and well-being. Age grades are prevalent among the Ekoi tribe in Central and Northern Cross River State. It is an avenue for measuring achievements which include knowledge and wisdom. In pre-colonial societies, age grades served as instrument for defence, sanitation, and the maintenance of law and order. The system gives members the right of free expression. It is also an avenue for decision making which, no doubt, can relate to the health and well-being of the people.

Family heads: This an effective tool for creating awareness among rural dwellers. Family heads are usually recognized elders who enjoy legitimacy and wield greater powers by virtue of their positions and wisdom. They are the spokesmen of the people that are living in different compounds. As the patriarch of the family, the family heads have the responsibility of gathering members for deliberations on matters that affect them. It is therefore, an effective avenue for creating awareness on public health and well-being.

Ward publicity: The ward is an association of lineage groups that share things in common. Traditionally, every ward has a council which consists of heads of the patriclans (Ihejiamaizu, 2001). In the ward, decisions on the regulations of social and political activities are taken, and therefore can be utilized for creating awareness on public health and well-being among rural dwellers.

Churches: The role of the church in creating awareness cannot be underestimated. The church teaches morals. In some communities, news about resumption of schools in the rural areas are communicated through the village churches and is regarded as reliable. In some communities, public health workers go from church to church to immunize children. It is therefore a fundamental pillar for creating awareness on public health and well-being in rural areas.

Schools: The school is an effective agency for crating awareness. The school as an instrument of socialization promotes the sensitization of individuals on vital issues of life. The role of schools in creating awareness on public health and well-being cannot therefore be over emphasized.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

These are non-political organizations established by individuals or groups to carryout certain functions. NGOs play vital roles in project implementation in the Third World. Their functions vary depending on the policy framework. There are NGOs whose main function is to transmit information and create awareness on implementation interventions on programmes in rural areas. The use of NGOs in creating awareness on public health and well-being cannot be ignored.

Strategies for creating awareness on public health and well-being

Creating awareness on public health and well-being involves utilizing one or a combination of the following strategies:

Persuasion: Persuasion is a fundamental strategy which involves an attempt to convince the rural people to accept the sincerity and value of public health and well-being in their domain. It consists of building support for the health programme in order for the rural dwellers to appreciate the correctness of government position on public health and well-being. This strategy therefore calls for the need to provide logistic support to the rural dwellers through training and guidance of traditional medical practitioners on health related matters.

Public Enlightenment: This is usually in the form of a campaign to educate the rural people on the importance of public health and well-being. The aim is to expose rural people to the dangers inherent in poor sanitary conditions and other health hazards. Therefore, as a means of creating awareness, this strategy enlightens the local people on certain health challenges which they suffer and for which relief is sought. Some of these health problems include obesity, hypertension, diabetes and other unhealthy eating habits such as late feeding and staying late into the night after stressful activities in the day. The strategy therefore, provides the opportunity to know the benefits of public health and well-being, and to gradually mobilize, and stimulate the local people for active participation.

Organized local forum: This is a corrolary to the above. The primary objective of the forum is to identify the health related needs of the local people with the aim of developing a work plan on creating awareness. The forum should involve meeting with all Stakeholders, including traditional medical practioners (local surgeons, bone setters, birth attendance, etc) and educating them on the imperatives of public health and well-being. Through such a forum, they would be sensitized on the need to liaise with government on issues of public health and well-being as a solution to local health problems. The forum also help to provide feedback to the programme managers on the success of the awareness exercise

Incentives: The main reason for incentives is to draw the attention of the rural people to public health and well-being. This promotes awareness and value for the programme. The process involve providing various forms of relief materials such as powder milk, drugs, mosquito nets, distribution of iron supplements, and other food items to households or family members. This will however stimulate the interest of the rural people in public health and well-being. It will also help to identify areas of need of the people so as to attract attention to the programme continually.

Obstacles to creating awareness on public health and well-being

A number of obstacles exist that pose challenges towards creating awareness on public health and well-being in rural Cross River State. These consist of the following:

Lack of co-operation: Being rural dwellers, most of the people are often unwilling to discuss vital issues with strangers. This is because of fears of divulging community secrets to enemies. Most rural dwellers prefer prophetic pronouncements and warnings from local churches than rely on information provided by health officials. Some others see traditional medical practices as cheap and without vigour. For instance, traditional medical practitioners may only request for a chicken or a bottle of local dry gin to settle the bill. There is therefore a high rate of ignorance exhibited by the rural dwellers toward government programmes.

Geographical terrain: This constitutes a serious problem. There is the problem of poor access roads due to the existence of mountains, forests or swamps. Large parts of the rural areas in Cross River State are predominantly remote. In most cases, movement is on foot through the narrow forest paths. In some riverine areas, local boats are used as means of transportation which may hinder creating awareness.

Illiteracy: Illiteracy of the rural people poses a major hindrance to creating awareness on public health and well-being. Most of the rural people are illiterates and can hardly correlate cause and effect. They cannot express themselves in English but relied heavily on oral local dialects. Thus, to create awareness, local interpreters are often used, otherwise there will be the problem of translating vernacular into English language which may not facilitate awareness.

Way forward for creating awareness on public health and well-being

In spite of the possibilities of problems or difficulties that may be encountered in creating awareness on public health and well-being in rural Cross River State, it is important to highlight the way forward for the study.

First, there is need to instill confidence in the rural people by showing concern, love, sense of belonging, warmth and friendliness and avoid the bullies that characterize nurses in hospitals, and which have discouraged many from utilizing orthodox medical practices in the urban areas.

Second, in order to create effective awareness on public health and well-being in the rural areas, enlightenment campaign managers, whose duty is to carry the message to the local people, should be prepared and willing to endure pains of moving long distances through the narrow rural roads to educate the

people. There is also need for organized local forum to enlighten the rural dwellers.

Finally, there is need for the government to embark on literacy campaigns in the rural areas. This will help the people to appreciate and participate in the programmes. It will also eradicate the problem of ignorance that has caused harm to the people in terms of drug abuse, self-medication or self-management. Besides, majority of the rural people are peasant farmers that leave their homes very early to their farms. This situation often makes the village to appear scanty and deserted. This creates the problem of meeting them in the day for awareness purposes. Therefore, local market days and Sundays should be utilized to create awareness since many people prefer to stay at home on such resting days.

Conclusion:

The need to create awareness on public health and well-being has attracted the interests and concerns of individuals, government, Donor Agencies, and Civil Societies in Cross River State. These interests and concerns are due to the importance of health and well-being in the society. The rural dwellers have for long been in the woods and therefore require adequate sensitization on public health and well-being.

Thus, to successfully enforce awareness on public health and well-being in the rural areas, several agencies exist through which the message can get to the grassroots. Some of these agencies include: Village Assembly, Local Churches and Schools as well as the use of a Village announcer or next-door-neighbour approach. Although there are problems here and there, it is envisaged that creating awareness on public health and well-being can effectively be enforced through the use of programme Managers that can instill confidence in the people, endure hardship, and promote participation by means of public enlightenment campaigns, persuasion, incentives, and organized local forum.

In all, the use of voluntary efforts and a clear understanding of traditional methods of creating awareness are imperative tools. There is need to have relevant information about the local people. It is also imperative to understand the psychology of the local people in order to know the right strategy for creating awareness on public health and well-being.

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