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THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS IN THE PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF HIV/AIDS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

There has been a change, of recent in the nature of work of librarians and information professionals, due to the emergence of deadly diseases like AIDS as well as the change in information needs of the local community. This change requires much more professional expertise, updated knowledge and critical thinking and involvement in the process of developing effective AIDS literary programmes. Librarians and information professionals can provide dedicated services to society by helping to manage and access AIDS information. This study, therefore, highlighted strategies for effective collaboration by librarians and information professionals, in the context of AIDS literary promotion efforts. The study further highlighted the challenges in the process of empowering people as regards campaign against AIDS. Suitable measures for addressing the challenges, to achieve essential success in the campaign against AIDS are also identified.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has a large population and low literacy levels. These consequently lead to low levels of awareness and information literacy level. HIV/AIDS is one of the most challenging public health problems ever faced the country. Nigeria, as the biggest, largest African nation, has the second largest population of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in Sub-Saharan Africa and largest in West African region. The national prevalence rate as at 2005 is 4.4% and about 3.5 million Nigerians are estimated to be living with infection (National HIV sentinel survey 2005). The 4.4% HIV sero-prevalence recorded in 2005 show a marginal decline of 0.6% compared to 5.0% recorded in 2003. This achievement is attributable to a number of responses from the collaborations of both public and private sectors ARFH, 2007).

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The first HIV/AIDS case in Nigeria was reported in 1986. The epidemic of HIV/AIDS is now linked to the fall in life expectancy in Nigeria from 53 years in 1990 to 44 years in 2005. HIV/AIDS prevalence is found in both urban and rural areas in Nigeria, however, it is significantly higher in the urban areas than in the rural areas. Young persons aged 15-29 years are the group worst hit by the epidemic. With the size of Nigeria's population, sero-prevalence studies predict that as many as 4 million Nigerians may die of complications arising from HIV/AIDS between now and 2008, while people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) is expected to increase to about 43 million.

Information is the first step in HIV prevention, ignorance about the disease and how the virus is transmitted can generate fear and prejudice towards those who are infected. The majority of the HIV positive population in Nigeria is not well informed about managing the various aspects of HIV/AIDS and unpredictable illnesses; often not provided with useful or accurate information by their physicians. Librarians and information professionals, need to care about and act on the situation. Librarians serving in different libraries/information centers ought to take a leading role in educating and transforming knowledge of and attitudes towards HIV/AIDS through extensive library programs.

In Nigeria, many infected people live in urban areas and do not know that they carry the virus. Many millions more, know nothing or too little about HIV to protect themselves against it. Educating people about HIV/AIDS and prevention is not a simple but rather a complicated task as Nigeria has many languages and different dialects. Access to information can empower people and help them to face health and medical challenges effectively. The spread of the epidemic in communities and urban areas presents a need to disseminate HIV/AIDS related information for health protection rather than waiting for information to follow the appearance of the disease in communities. Thus, innovative strategies to disseminate HIV/AIDS information amongst disadvantaged population groups are needed. It has been observed that awareness is greater amongst the literate. Libraries need to provide tailor-made education programs for those at lower education levels. Community empowerment can lead to advocacy, political action, policy changes or legislation in favour of disadvantaged groups.

This study is, therefore, aimed at identifying the critical role of librarian and information professionals in the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. Also, the challenges focusing the librarians as regards information management for HIV/AIDS prevention and control would be highlighted. Recommendations would be made on how these challenges can be addressed and overcome. The role of libraries in disseminating HIV/AIDS information cannot be over emphasized. Chikozo (2005) emphasized the role of libraries in collecting, repackaging and disseminating information on HIV/AIDS to different sectors in their respective countries as a means of reducing the impact of the disease in developing countries.

The challenges to the provision of HIV/AIDS information by libraries in developing countries are also highlighted. Also Press and Digs-Hobson (2005) opined that librarians can play an important role in the provision of health information by listening to community needs, developing cultural competence, and working with community partners. Meeting the health information needs of diverse communities is a challenge for librarians. ARFH (2007) emphasized the need for librarians to be abreast of basis HIV/AIDS information, as a major responsibility. Such information need to be disseminated to the general populace who might be in need of such information for whatever reason. Furthermore Charles (2003) recommends library intervention to control HIV/AIDS and identifies various programmes and activities of the National Library of Uganda and the Kenya National Library Service to delivering integrated HIV/AIDS services and programs to people. However, ARFH (2007) maintained that librarians in Nigeria are not well informed about all aspects of HIV/AIDS. Ajuwon (2007) opined that librarians and other information professionals have important roles to play in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. He emphasized that librarians in Nigeria should be current about HIV/AIDS situation in Nigeria and globally and also know where to access latest information about HIV/AIDS.

Wald (2000) reviews the poor availability of white literature on AIDS for use by both health workers and the general public in Ethiopia, and made a case for the use of grey literature to raise awareness. Ghosh (2005) identifies the effectiveness of the use of posters to disseminate health information to the rural masses in India. Information on the magnitude of HIV/AIDS problem is necessary for planning, programming policy formulation, advocacy and community participation (HIV/AIDS steering committee, our Saviour's Church, 2007). Appreciating the magnitude of the problem helps to explain why HIV/AIDS is not like any other disease.

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS IN DISSEMINATING INFORMATION

Librarians can play dual roles as both advocates and educators in the process of HIV/AIDS information dissemination. According to Fourie (2004) librarians require empathy, tireless dedication to a cause, commitment, and a service-for-free orientation, for the benefit of society at large. Ready availability of up-to-date information enables timely and informed decision making, as well as efficient allocation and mobilization of resources. Thus, the librarians in Nigeria have to play a decisive role through the process of educating their society, because they are generally the people who have the responsibility of collecting and organizing the resources commensurate with the needs of the local community.

Librarians working in public and medical libraries can play an active role in developing open Archive collections, which is aimed at helping researchers to explore their output on HIV/AIDS for the benefit of the local community. Regular user awareness

programs can be conducted for this purpose. Also, the librarians can offer services to achieve work on HIV/AIDS by Nigerian authors. Therefore, it is important that librarians constantly update their knowledge and make themselves knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS. ARFH (2007) and Ajuwon (2007) corroborated this by emphasizing the need by librarians to get updated about latest issues in various HIV/AIDS thematic areas as well as provide up-to-date information about HIV/AIDS. Moreover, librarians need to expand their roles as educators to that of health educators as well and target local groups within the community who might require the attention of information specialists as a means of combating the disease, librarians serving in various libraries need to engage in the following: (i) empower adolescents to protect themselves from HIV infection; (ii) create documentation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs); (iii) make information relevant, realistic and acceptable to the local community; (iv) reduce the stigma of HIV/AIDS infection and (v) form partnerships with marginalized community groups, such as orphans, widows and Aged.

Libraries in Nigeria should expand the scope of information resources they collect and distribute to include sources outside the role of traditional libraries, including taking a leadership role in using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for sharing digital materials and providing information in formats that are accessible and interesting to children and young adults who are making decisions about their own sexual behaviour. Ajuwon (2007) corroborated this by emphasizing the need by librarians and information professionals to be skillful in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as a major requirement for them to be effective in the performance of their roles in the management of information on HIV/AIDS.

Also, in their quest to promote HIV/AIDS literacy, librarians in Nigeria should undertake, as part of their roles, the following: (i) Organize seminars, exhibitions, workshop etc. and also distribute publications on HIV/AIDS freely among the public during exhibitions and lectures; (ii) Arrange conversation with their local community on impact of HIV/AIDS; (iii) Organize gatherings among peer groups to discuss various issues related to the disease; (iv) Create alternative ways of delivering information to young adults who are unable to attend school because of HIV/AIDS. Such young adults may have the disease or may have been orphaned as a result of parents dying of AIDS; (v) Translate documents on HIV/AIDS data bases already available on the internet; (vi) Deliver information and referral services which can refer to local-related service; (vii) Provide interactive access to HIV/AIDS databases already available on the internet and (viii) Provide assistance to the NGOs and health associations working on HIV/AIDS in the creation and distribution of information materials for public access.

CHALLENGES TO HIV/AIDS INFORMATION ACCESS, MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL IN NIGERIA

In controlling HIV/AIDS epidemic's expansion in Nigeria, health communications and education programs must not limit their operations to prevention messages, but also address the interrelated components of the HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support (UNAIDS, 2001). However, there are challenges to the provision of HIV/AIDS information of librarians in Nigeria posed by both the epidemic and socio-economic environment: (i) the dynamics of the epidemic raise the need to keep abreast with new developments, thus the need to actively collect, synthesise and disseminate information. This is constrained by lack of adequate resources (human, financial and material) to initiate and sustain efforts; (ii) low levels of penetration of the infrastructure and supporting environment necessary to effectively use ICTs; (iii) lack of ICT related training for Librarians; (iv) the multiplicity of demand for consistent, relevant and timely information for HIV/AIDS and existence of factors at various levels, and in different settings also poses the challenge of processing and packaging the same information for different level of users; (iv) inadequate funding of libraries might make it difficult for libraries and librarians in Nigeria to effectively harness ICTs in the provision of HIV/AIDS information; (v) low literacy levels and a poor information culture. Limited information literacy increases demands for more information processing to add value to information and services to promote information awareness, accessibility and usability. In addition, there is lack of appropriate forum for sharing knowledge on HIV/AIDS.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The campaign and fight against HIV/AIDS pandemic requires the delivery of timely, credible and multi-sectoral information about HIV/AIDS. Such information has to reach not just the clinicians, medical personnel and scientists, but also a huge array of others, such as behavioural specialists; policymakers, donors, social activists, industry leaders as well as common people. Nigeria has a good programme in terms of treatment but it has to take the preventive aspects very important to forestall greater crisis in coming years. The outbreak of such crisis may be too expensive for the country. Thus, there is need for strong advocacy and political support at the national level. Library users need to be educated on how to access health information on the internet, to enable them to be knowledgeable on how to maintain more healthy lifestyle. Provide them with reliable information about their problems and make them aware of provable treatment options. One major way of successfully combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic is the creation of an infrastructure that develops simultaneously, the healthcare networks, education programs and community participation.

Recommendations on how some of these challenges can be met are proffered. There are insufficient libraries and information institutions to meet the needs of culturally

and linguistically diverse people in Nigeria. The Health Resource Centre should be created to provide medical library and health information resources to the general public. Librarians in public libraries procuring information resources on HIV/AIDS must educate library users and the general public on maximizing access to HIV/AIDS information. Prevention should be a key area of focus and prime concern that can be brought about by awareness. Reducing the risks through awareness with the help of modern technologies and mass media should be priority if Nigeria is not to be free from HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Librarians should take up pre and post HIV test counseling. The importance of counseling is brought home by the fact that people who have been counseled took precautions to protect their partner/child from getting infected. There is also the need for enhancing competencies to disseminate health information if librarians are to play a significant role in HIV/AIDS literacy. Hence, they must have well developed training and facilitating skills, to help people to use not only libraries but also information sources in different forms and formats. Also, the need for collaboration with NGOs and other libraries/networks is very essential, Health related information seekers often prefer to talk with someone with the same condition. Thus, librarians in Public libraries may collaborate with medical librarians in approaching support groups for those with medical conditions.

Collaborations with organizations that focus on HIV/AIDS could be considered (Dorothy and Procaccino, 2004). Librarians should establish cooperation and links with external partners and international organisations for funding of programmes on HIV/AIDS and should aim to have vibrant organizations concerned with HIV/AIDS. Moreover, Librarians should also be at the vanguard of ensuring the process of developing of community networks and HIV/AIDS information portal accessible through libraries. Internet has brought people together, even from remote regions, to a "virtual conference table". Some of the most marginalized communities of the world are now actively involved in dialogue and in policy making on HIV. People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) who are not confident enough to speak up for themselves would join the network, because it would mean that other people would get to know about each other.

Librarians should develop good strategy to bring ICTs into libraries, get politicians and funding agencies to listen to the needs of libraries. Critical to planning any adoption of convergence technologies is ensuring trained staffs are available to maintain the network. Librarians working in public libraries must be encouraged to attend continuing education programs and skill. ICT facilities should be channeled to create virtual opportunities for the disadvantaged people. As ICT infrastructures improve, location, independence increases. Lastly, there is also the need for the inclusion of Medical Informatics in Library and Information Science (LIS) Syllabus. The introduction of medical librarianship as elective subject can be done for the Nigerian library schools. This will afford the librarians first hand knowledge on Health and Medical Information.

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