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Health Education for Social Change: A Strategy for Public Health development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Health education is one of the means of implementing health promotion and disease prevention programs. Studies have shown that the global economic challenges, social and environmental factors are the causes of many diseases and behaviours that are associated to illnesses. Health education provides information to target population on a particular health topics, including health benefits and threats they faced, thereby providing tools to build capacity and support behavioural changes in an appropriate settings. This paper explains the strategies through which health education improves health development in Nigeria, importance of health education, community health education and government policy and the economic importance of health education. Health education can help to boost the economy by reducing healthcare spending and lost productivity due to preventable illness.

Keywords: Health Education, Importance of Health Education, Community health education and Government policy, The Economic importance of health education, Health Education for social Change

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1.1 Introduction

The practice of health education in Nigeria has been in existence for centuries. As far back 1950 's. It was common to observe in primary and secondary schools and in teachers training institutions. Teachers inspecting children for cleanliness when children are found to be untidy or in need of immediate health attention. They were usually sent home or given first aid or sent to appropriate health providers.

The roles of health education in promoting health in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. It has gone a long way to revert the health sector and the delivery system in terms of saving lives and the betterment of the populace.

1.2 Health Education

Health is the extent to which an individual or group is able to realize aspirations and satisfy needs and also change or cope with the environment. Health is the level of the general condition of a person's mind and body, usually meaning to be free from illness, injury or pain (as in "good health" or "healthy"). The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health in its broader sense in 1946 as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Health education is the profession of educating people about health. Areas within this profession encompass environmental health, physical health, social health, emotional health, intellectual health, and spiritual health. It can be defined as the principle by which individuals and groups of people learn to behave in a manner conducive to the promotion, maintenance, or restoration of health. However, as there are multiple definitions of health, there are also multiple definitions of health education. The Joint Committee on Health Education and Promotion Terminology of 2001 defined Health Education as "any combination of planned learning experiences based on sound theories that provide individuals, groups, and communities the opportunity to acquire information and the skills needed to make quality health decisions." The World Health Organization defined Health Education as "compris[ing] [of] consciously constructed opportunities for learning involving some form of communication designed to improve health literacy, including improving knowledge, and developing life skills which are conducive to individual and community health.

1.3 Health Education in Nigeria

As well as health education in Nigeria is a concurrent responsibility of the three tiers of government in the country. Private providers of health care have a visible role to play in health care delivery. The federal government's role is mostly limited to coordinating the affairs of the university teaching hospitals, Federal Medical Centres (tertiary health care) while the state government manages the various general hospitals (secondary health care) and the local government focus on dispensaries (primary health care), which are regulated by the federal government through the national Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA). A long run indicator of the ability of the country to provide food sustenance and avoid malnutrition is the rate of growth of per capita food production. Historically, health insurance in Nigeria can be applied to a few instances: free health care provided and financed for all citizens, health care provided by government through a special health insurance scheme for government employees and private firms entering contracts with private health care providers. However, there are few people who fall within the three instances.



In May 1999, the government created the National Health Insurance Scheme, the scheme encompasses government employees, the organized private sector and the informal sector. Legislative wise, the scheme also covers children under five, permanently disabled persons and prison inmates. In 2004, the administration of Obasanjo further gave more legislative powers to the scheme with positive amendments to the original 1999 legislative act.

2.1 Importance of Health Education

Health education programs help empower individuals and communities to live healthier lives by improving their physical, mental, emotional and social health by increasing their knowledge and influencing their attitudes about caring for their well-being.

Health education focuses on prevention, increasing health equity, and decreasing negative health outcomes such as availability and accessibility of health services, benefiting all stakeholders.

Health education utilizes several of the effective educational tools available for spreading awareness among people regarding their personal health. In our community health care center, a team of medical professionals and support staff offers basic information to the patients concerning their health and those in their family. Health education relies on the principle of “prevention is better than cure” and therefore makes aware the patients about their overall health status and measures to maintain and improve it. The importance of health education and preventive services lies in its valuable contribution to the education of the community. By adopting effective educational tools and resources available, our health care providers aid in propagating the message of good health. Our holistic approach to health education extends to all the areas of wellness such as physical, psychological, social, and spiritual.

Efficient programs implemented through health education in Nigeria certainly influence the overall community, thereby prompting the individuals to become more conscious regarding their personal health. Some of the key services offered by health education and preventive services are: Conducting presentations and classes for patients covering a range of topics like sexual and reproductive health, disease prevention, general well-being, stress management, and nutrition.

Special awareness programs for patients diagnosed with diabetes and hypertension that includes the numerous ways to cope with having the disease as well as in minimizing its effects on the body.

Mental health initiatives for college students and elders that comprise of detailed presentations and exercises designed to boost the psychological well-being of an individual.

Alcohol and drug prevention programs, offering a comprehensive review of the harmful effects in relying on such addictive substances. It also includes counselling and awareness programs aimed at vulnerable individuals like school and college students.



2.2 Community Health Education

Roles of health education has been described as “the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts and informed choices of society, organizations, public and private, communities and individuals.” It is concerned with threats to the overall health of a community based on population health analysis. Public health has many sub-fields, but typically includes the interdisciplinary categories of epidemiology, biostatistics and health services. Environmental health, community health, behavioral health, and occupational health are also important areas of public health.

The focus of health education is to prevent and manage diseases, injuries and other health conditions through surveillance of cases and the promotion of healthy behavior, communities, and (in aspects relevant to human health) environments. Its aim is to prevent health problems from happening or re-occurring by implementing educational programs, developing policies, administering services and conducting research. In many cases, treating a disease or controlling a pathogen can be vital to preventing it in others, such as during an outbreak.

Health education also takes various actions to limit the health disparities between different areas of the country. One issue is the access of individuals and communities to health care in terms of financial, geographical or socio-cultural constraints to accessing and using services.

2.3 Economic Importance of Health Education

Health education can also boost a community’s economy by reducing healthcare spending and lost productivity due to preventable illness. Obesity and tobacco use, for example, cost Nigeria billions of naira each year in healthcare costs and lost productivity. Health and education are two closely related human capital components that work together to make the individual more productive and therefore promote economic growth

Healthy and educated citizens are productive and better prepared to face the future. Health and education is a fundamental driver for economic growth and development. In economic parlance, it is believed that health and education are the two crucial factors for human capital development and as such have been demonstrated to be the basis of an individual’s economic productivity.

According to Ewurum et al (2015) given poor health infrastructure, illness and disease shorten the working lives of people, thereby reducing their lifetime earnings. Strauss and Thomas (1998) and Schultz (1999) opined that good health has positive effects on the learning abilities of children, which leads to better educational outcomes in school completion rates, higher mean years of schooling, achievements and increases the efficiency of human capital formation by individuals and households which ultimately impact the economy.

2.4 Health Education for Social Change

Recognizing that health improvement activities and performance monitoring imply the need for change in communities, the committee for health in Nigeria sought to explore some of the theories of social change



and how they might relate specifically to health and health care. It was noted that change is ubiquitous today in health care systems, health care policy, and social policy and is occurring in multiple dimensions.

Change is not linear. It occurs in a specific context and is subject to complicated interactions. Change is a process of transition; therefore, it is fruitful to study both the change process and its outcome. To determine whether an outcome is causally related to a particular intervention, it is necessary to study the process of change linking the intervention and the outcome. The suggestion was made that natural experiments provide unique opportunities to study change and deserve more scrutiny than they currently receive.

Change at the individual level is described by several models. The “stages of change” model was developed to describe smoking cessation. Readiness for change progresses through stages of precontemplation, contemplation, action, and maintenance. For maximum impact, health interventions are chosen with attention to the individual’s stage of readiness.

An organizational model of change described by Lewin (1976) is based on a three-stage process that includes “unfreezing” the old behavior, cognitive recognition of the need for a new behavior, and “refreezing” the new behavior. This description is accurate for many organizational change processes. In health care, however, change is currently so rapid that behaviour is in a seemingly constant state of unfreezing and refreezing.

3.1 Conclusion

The roles of health education in promoting health in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. It has gone a long way to revert the health sector and the delivery system in terms of saving lives and the betterment of the populace.

Also, traditional medical practices are very much a part of the health care delivery system in Nigeria today as they were during and before the struggle for independence. Health care during the period of independence was oriented primarily to curative rather than preventive care. For example, as a result of the poor attempt to establish preventive programs, measles remained the greatest killer of children. By this time, the WHO had proven beyond reasonable doubt that proper execution of preventive programs can eradicate deadly diseases, and indeed, small pox was almost non-existent in Nigeria at this time.

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