

Health Education as a Tool for Effective Primary Health Care Services in Nigeria

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Abstract

Quality health is a fundamental right of all Nigerian citizens. This can only be achieved through effective health care services. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of health education as tool for effective primary health care services in Nigeria. The paper discussed the concept of health education, challenges of effective primary health care services in Nigeria, components of primary health care and the need for health education in the primary health care system. In conclusion, the practice of primary health care services cannot be effective without proper implementation of health education. It therefore, recommended that government at all levels should ensure that health education and well trained health educators should form part of medical team for effective PHC services in Nigeria.

Keywords: health, health education, effective, primary health care services

INTRODUCTION

Health is an important aspect of human life. It encompasses all activities aimed at ensuring the protection of the body from diseases and promoting good habit. According to World Health Organisation (WHO, 1947), Health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well being of individual and not the mere absence of diseases or infirmities. To achieve all these variables to make individuals health, health education has an important role to play.

Health education is defined as any combination of learning experiences designed to help individuals and communities improve their health, by increasing their knowledge or influencing their attitudes (WHO, 2008; Johnson, 2010). The goal of primary health care (PHC) was to provide accessible health for all by the year 2000 and beyond, unfortunately, this is yet to be achieved in Nigeria and seems to be unrealistic in the next decade (Abdulraheem, Oladipo & Amodu, 2011). The PHC aims at providing people of the world with the basic health services. Though PHC centers were established in both rural and urban areas in Nigeria with the intention of equity and easy access, regrettably, the rural populations in Nigeria under utilized the PHC unlike their urban counterparts (Mike, 2010). PHC is a new approach to health care which helps in improving the health status of the community.

According to WHO (2008), primary health care is described as an essential health care system based on practical, scientifically sound and socially acceptable method and technology, made universally accessible

to individuals and families in the community, through their full participation and at a cost that the community can afford at every stage of their development in the spirit of self reliance and self determination. The goal of the National Health Policy (1987) is to bring a comprehensive health care system based on primary health care that is promotive, protective, preventive, restorative and rehabilitative to all citizens within the available resources so that individuals and communities are assured of productivity, social well-being and enjoyment of living. The health services, based on PHC among other things are; education concerning prevailing health problems and the methods of preventing and controlling them, promotion of food supply and proper nutrition, maternal and child care, including family planning, immunization against the major infectious diseases, prevention and control of locally endemic and epidemic diseases and provision of essential drugs and supplies (Adeyemo, 2005).

Despite, all the effort of the Federal Government through the state Government to the local government to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2011), there are still enough cases of maternal mortality (Oyewole, 1999), high mortality rate due to malaria, typhoid, cholera and other infectious diseases (Abiodun, 2010) at the primary level as a result of ineffective primary health care system. Health Education is the profession of educating people so as to make an informed decision about their health. Health education can serve as a tool to mobilize people and educate people on simple ways to prevent themselves against the invasion of micro-organism which cause infection.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of health education on effective primary health care services in Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Government and other stakeholders on health has made tremendous efforts in improving the life and health of its citizens in Nigeria by creating health facilities such as provision of portable water supply, good sanitary and waste disposal, good roads network and provision of primary health services which are mostly equipped with health personnel such as physicians, nurses, lab attendant, nutritionist. All these provisions are more effective in the urban areas than its rural counterpart as a result of health education provided via audio, visual and audio visual media which makes the urban dwellers to have more information about the usefulness of these facilities.

In the rural communities which this research focuses more on, as a result of inadequate provision of electricity which debar them from listening to radio, watching televisions where they can get information so as to make informed decisions is lacking and often leads to low patronage of primary health care services in the rural. Health education can be used as tool for effective primary health care services. Health educators should form part of the health team in primary health care centers in which his/her services will not be limited to the confine of the PHC but also going out and giving health talks to the general usefulness of this PHC and ways in which people can live in healthy ways

Concept of Health Education

Health Education plays a crucial role in the development of healthy, inclusive and equitable social, psychological and physical environment. It reflects current best practice, using an empowering, multi-dimensional, multi professional approach which relates to all setting, organizations, including the community, schools, health services and the workplace (Gordon, 2008). Health Education helps provide health knowledge, enhance wellness behaviours, promote health situations, facilitate healthful relationship and enables community members make responsible decisions. The Joint Committee on Health Education and Promotion Terminology (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.

Health Education at the Primary Health Care (PHC) level help to address issues related to disease prevention; consumer health, environmental, emotional, sexual health, first aid, safety and disaster preparedness, substance abuse prevention, human

growth and development (Tochete & Fitch, 2005). They further asserted that, in the PHC, health education serves as a tool to coordinate health workers in counseling as well as education services such as health risk appraisals and health screenings.

Challenges of Effective Primary Health Care Services in Nigeria

The Nigerian government is committed to quality and accessible public health services through provision of primary health care in rural areas as well as provision of preventive and curative services (Nigeria constitution, 1999). PHC is provided by local government authority through health centers and health posts and they are staffed by nurses, midwives, community health officers, health technicians, community health extension workers and with physicians.

The essence of health care to the local government is to make the management of PHC services more effective and closer to the grassroots. One of the hindrances primary health care services in Nigeria has to do with insufficient number of health workers as well, as their uneven distribution, this makes the health care services system ineffective and make the community seek for health services else where such as herbs and other local health facilities and sometimes patronize quacks in the process (Adedeji, 2008); Omoleke, 2005).

Other challenges facing effective primary health care services in Nigeria are lack of health education in the rural communities, poor facilities and equipment such as bad or inadequate vehicles for transporting the health workers for immunization services, inadequate finances for day to day running of PHC services because most of the internally generated revenue of local government is meager and insufficient for effective PHC services (Adeyemo, 2005).

Components of Primary Health Care

The essential components of primary health care observed by WHO (1987) are; health education concerning, prevailing health problems and the methods of preventing and controlling them; promotion of food supply and proper nutrition; adequate supply of safe water and basic sanitation; maternal and child health care, including, family planning; immunization against major infections diseases, prevention and control of local endemic and epidemic diseases, appropriate treatment of common diseases and injuries; and provision of essential drugs and supplies.

Health Education as a Tool for Effective PHC Services

Health education is the process of persuading people to accept measures which will improve their health and to reject those that will have an adverse effect

(Brian, 2008). All the various components of primary health care services can only succeed if they are widely accepted by the individual and the community. Health education is of more significant tool in primary health care services because individual behaviour now has a greater effect on his health.

In Nigeria, the methods of disseminating health education to the people can be described as still very low especially to the mostly affected areas which are the rural areas where there are poor electric supplies and make it difficult to listen or watch health information on electronic media.

The role of health education is to convince the community and individuals of the importance of health and services rendered by the PHC. One of the best ways to achieve effective PHC is to ensure that the educating role becomes spread out and the end effect will be equally widespread throughout the population.

Need for Health Education in the Primary Health Care System

WHO, 2008 identified five major needs for health education in PHC and these needs include the following:

- **Improved Health:** Health education helps people improve their health in all stages of life. This health educator do by visiting communities to give health talks as well as voluntary counseling on how to improve health and live a disease free life.
- **Improve Decision-Making:** It helps people make better health decisions. To do so, the health educator often tailors their message to the group they are educating. It explains the risks of unhealthy habits like smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and unprotected sex.
- **Fight Diseases:** The goal of health education at the primary health care system is to minimize the occurrence of life-threatening illnesses. For example, the risk of diabetes and heart diseases can be lessened with proper diet and exercise.
- **Fight Misconception:** Health education helps to correct some misconception that affect people's health. For example, in the Northern part of Nigeria, where people believed that immunization is a means of putting an end to child bearing (Family planning) can be corrected through health education.
- **Provide Resources:** Health Educators provide educational resources in the form of fliers carrying health messages, posters and pamphlet. It also creates awareness on health services that are available for free or at minimal cost.

Role of Health Education in Primary Health Care Services

Health education plays the following vital roles in the implementation of primary health care components. Johnson (2010), identified the roles as; immunization, maternity services, child health, communicable diseases control, environmental health, nutrition, school health services, first and services, drug education, accident prevention and emergency services, aid family life education.

CONCLUSION

The practice of primary health care services cannot be effective without the inculcation of health education. Involvement of trained health educators in the planning and implementation of primary health care system will help to remove obstacles to the effectiveness of PHC in Nigeria. There is need for a national approach to health educator to enhance behavioral change. The unit within the PHC responsible for health promotion and education needs to be supported and strengthened to discharge her responsibilities effectively. Health education will help to create awareness of health problems and solution which will in turn create more accessibility and participation in PHC programmes.

RECOMMENDATION

Having identified the importance of health education as a tool for effective PHC system in Nigeria, the following recommendations are suggested;

1. Government at all levels should ensure that health education and well trained health educators should form part of the medical team in the PHC centers.
2. There is the need for maintenance of minimum health standard, improved housing condition, adequate potable water supply, environmental sanitation and food supply for the sustenance of good health condition.
3. Health education should be provided for the community members so as to make informed health decisions and also ways of preventing communicable diseases

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

In line with the theme of the International Conference which focuses on National Capacity Building Strategy for Sustainable Development and Poverty Alleviation, this paper will contribute to knowledge in the following capacities;

1. It improves the health of the community dwellers and alleviate their poverty by educating them on the usefulness of PHC giving a sound mind in a sound body and health serves as an integral part of overall development.
2. It gives priority to improved living condition of the people beyond the present poverty level, so as to enhance better healthy living.

To this end, intensive and effective health education of the public must be of necessity, be reinforced in other to eliminate diseases such as malaria, typhoid, cholera and other infectious diseases which still ravage our community.

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