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A SURVEY OF THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC HEALTH SCIENCE LIBRARIANS IN SELECTED NIGERIAN MEDICAL LIBRARIES

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a survey of academic health science librarians in selected Nigerian Medical Libraries to discover what they perceived as their role in health education in Nigeria and their contribution to the achievement of the health for all goals. Questionnaires were distributed to all health science librarians in eight medical libraries of Colleges of Medicine. Results revealed that the majority had positive attitude toward health education. they all agreed that the librarians could contribute by intensifying their traditional function of collection development, processing for easy retrieval and dissemination of health information.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian society like the rest of Africa is plagued with constant epidemics even for diseases that have been totally eradicated elsewhere in the world. Adewusi (1994) and WHO (1990) reported that this is worsened by fact that medical attention is so expensive that many patronize quacks and therefore die of curable diseases. This gave rise to the urgent need to promote health education so as to reduce the occurrence of these epidemics to the barest minimum. However, there is shortage of health manpower to effectively carry out health education programmes. This fact is acknowledged by Federal Ministry of Health (1994) and Onipide (1994) who have further advocated developing and co-opting of more manpower who will be involved in health services information awareness programmes. Thus health education which according to Green (1993) consists of activities that assist individuals, families and communities to understand the health consequences of a particular life style so as to re-inforce voluntary behaviours conducive to health. This is a way of reducing the occurrence of epidemics.

The Medical Library is a store house and a nerve centre of information activities in a health institution. It is specialised in providing accurate medical information regardless of how the information is used. Since information gathered but locked up in libraries will not positively impact on our very depressing health

situation, Makumbin (1994) suggested that sciences librarians will only be maximally used if the health sciences librarians created interaction between the library, its immediate and rural communities. The medical library is bedeviled with many problems. These problems have been catalogued by many health sciences librarians like Okeke (1989), Osiobe (1983) and Aiyepoku (1992) to include dependency on the parent organisation, lack of standardization, poor equipment and expensive modern techniques in information processing to enable the library contribute to health promotion in Nigeria. However, scholars like Gann (1986) recommended the innovative use of available resources and exploitation of institutional strength for the advancement of Medical Librarianship as a profession should be the trend in library and information profession in the year 2,000 A.D. This trend agrees with W.H.O Plan of Action (1994). The W.H.O (1999) World Health Report also supported the promotion of health education needed for health for all by the year 2,000.

The aim of this study is to document the views of health science librarians on health education and to sample their opinions about what role the Health Sciences Librarians should play in health education.

METHODOLOGY

A representative sample of eight Libraries of Medical Colleges was drawn out of the total of 37 Universities in Nigeria (Systematic random selection). Those Universities were evenly spread over the country and are representatives of the four major health regions of Nigeria. It also represents Federal owned Universities of both the first, second and third generations. The sample population consisted of all Academic Librarians in the Universities of Ahmadu Bello, Benin, Calabar, Ibadan, Ilorin, Lagos, Maiduguri and Nigeria. The questionnaires contained certain portion of factual information about peoples previous experiences and subject background for instance. Much of the research focused on opinions, feelings and attitudes hence it is largely qualitative.

The questionnaires were administered after pre-testing and necessary corrections were made, with the aid of two graduate assistants within the period of three days. Those who could not complete theirs within that period were asked to send them to the researcher by mail. In all, the period of four months was used for the administration of the questionnaires. All results are computed in percentages.

RESULTS

Table 1 depicts questionnaires returns from the Universities. The highest returns were from Universities of Lagos,(31.6%), Ahmadu Bello (21.1%) and Ibadan (15.8%)

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TABLE 1
QUESTIONNAIRES RETURNS FROM THE UNIVERSITIES

College/Faculty Of Medicine	Number Administered	No. Returned	%
Ahmadu Bello	5	4	21.1
Benin	2	2	10.5
Calabar	1	1	5.3
Ibadan	4	3	15.8
Ilorin	1	1	5.3
Lagos	6	6	31.6
Maiduguri	1	1	5.3
Nigeria	1	1	5.3
TOTAL	21	19	90.5

All academic Librarians in the institutions were covered in the study

TABLE 2
SUBJECT BACKGROUND OF RESPONDENTS

Subject	Respondents n = 19	% of Respondents
Library Science	9	47.4
History	3	15.8
English	2	10.5
Agriculture	1	5.3
Science education	1	5.3
Sociology education	1	5.3
Information Science	1	5.3
Religions Studies	1	5.3
Total	19	100

Table 2 reports the major background of the Health Science Librarians Library Science (47.4%), History (15.8%) and English (10.5%).

Table 3 contains details of the number of Librarians on the staff list of the Medical Libraries and table 4 recommended roles they should play in supplying the masses health information. University of Lagos, Ahmadu Bello and Ibadan have

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the largest number of Academic Librarians, the recommended roles for Health Sciences Libraries are collection development (100%), Information repackaging (84.2%) and creation of indexes and abstracts for Medical personnel involved in health education programmes.

TABLE 3

ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS IN THE INSTITUTIONS COVERED

Medical Libraries	Academic Librarians
Ahmadu Bello	5
Benin	2
Calabar.	-
Ibadan	4
Ilorin	-
Lagos	6
Maiduguri	-
Nigeria	2
TOTAL	19

TABLE 4

RECOMMENDED ROLES

Type of Role	NO. OF Respondent	%	Ranking
Collection development processing	19	100	1
Repacking information on topical issues.	16	84.2	2
Creation of data base from indexes and abstracts.	14	73.7	4
Film shows	10	52.6	4
Writing posters & booklet based on health issues	7	36.8	5
Organising talks on topical issues in medicine for the local communities	3	15.8	6

Lastly, table 5 summarizes the problems the librarians are faced with in trying to make health information available to the larger society. These include time constraint for 89.5% of the respondent and inadequate financial support 78.8%, 47% forty seven percent also complained of inaccessibility to current and relevant information.

TABLE 5

FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST PARTICIPATION IN HEALTH EDUCATION.

Inhibiting factors	No. of Respondent	%
Inaccessibility of recent and relevant information	9	47.4
Time Constraints	17	89.5
Uncooperative attitude of medical experts	7	36.8
Inadequate financial support from health management officials	15	78.9

DISCUSSION

The result from this survey shows that University of Lagos, Ahmadu Bello and Ibadan, all first generation Universities had higher questionnaire return rate. It also shows that Academic Librarians had subject background at the first degree level other than Librarianship. However, the majority of them 47.4% had Bachelors in Librarianship (BLS) before proceeding to the Master in Library Studies (MLS). Other first degree courses of the librarians covered included History and Religious Studies (5.3%) respectively. The data revealed that majority of the Medical Librarians did not have a pure science background. Further studies will reveal whether job performance is enhanced by having a pure science background. Sixty percent of those questioned were men, while forty percent of them were women. This suggests that there are more women in the profession than men. The staff situation in the medical Libraries under study showed that number of para- professionals and the academics were almost the same. Two of the libraries did not even have academic librarians.

Among the endorsed roles for librarians to play in health education by their colleagues were collection development and dissemination of health information which are traditional functions of the librarian. A new dimension was added when 16 respondents requested their associates to also delve into repackaging of information from local theses and dissertations for the affected community. Similar

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projects have been embarked upon in South Africa by the health science librarians like Kale (1994). Next in ranking to the above is the creation of indexes and abstracts from local studies for the use of medical personnel. This is in line with the Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA) (1996) African Index Medicis (Aim) project. However, organisation of talks and seminars on topical issues for local communities was not very popular among the librarians as means of transferring the health information in their custody.

In general, the responses unmasked the fact that the health sciences librarians had many creative ideas about possible ways they could contribute positively to health education in Nigeria. Despite these ideas, the subject group had constraints in the fulfillment of these objectives. These are time constraints, inadequate financial support from health institutions and inaccessibility to recent and relevant health information. The librarian shows more effort in assembling local research findings in such a way that they are accessible and could be retrieved by health experts.

CONCLUSION

The majority of the health Science Librarians had positive attitude about their ability to contribute to health education in Nigeria. They acknowledged that their traditional function of collection development was already a contribution to this. The respondents however. Information repackaging of local theses and dissertations as well as index and abstracting as an innovative approach to supporting health education in Nigeria. They further noted that all these would only be made possible by financial and moral support of the health institution authorities. The subject group also admitted the need for assistance of the subject specialist for expert advice. With the above in place, this paper concludes that the librarians need not hesitate in joining the health revolution where they can be strongly motivated, better trained and intergrated into a multi- disciplinary and multi-sectional health development and can make decisive contributions to the promotion of primary health in Nigeria through provision of health information.

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