

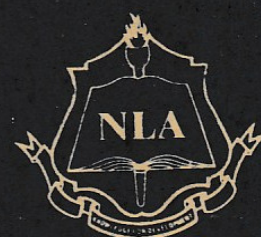
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# POTENTIALS OF MEDICAL LIBRARIES IN PUBLIC HEALTH INFORMATION IN NIGERIA: A PILOT STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to summarise the poor health situation in Nigeria and the role of the Medical Libraries in ameliorating this by way of health information. Health science librarians of four institutions were interviewed and results revealed that there is a need for medical libraries to provide health information to the people in urban and rural areas. Sixty three percent of the respondents further suggested that the health needs of a particular community be identified by health professionals in the hospitals and clinics of the area. The librarians catalogued several strategies for meeting such information needs. The highest in ranking was that 60% of the respondents requested their colleagues to organise workshops and seminars which will bring medical professionals and media practitioners together to dialogue and decide on the best way to present health information to the public. The librarians (81%) also agreed that the best medium for communicating health information was by using audio-visual aids.*

## INTRODUCTION

Health information is a health data which has been validated and organised. It is essential to the Nigerian urban poor and rural population, if they are to acquire the necessary knowledge which will enable them take better care of their health, prevent diseases and cope effectively with many problems without recourse to health services. These health services are usually non-existent and when available, the cost is prohibitive.

Nigeria like most African regions is caught in an economic and political upheaval in which the poor health of the population is undermining economic performance<sup>1</sup>. The resulting poverty means fewer funds being spent on healthcare. This means that health infrastructure in most states in Nigeria is in an awful state. Hospitals,

clinics, health centres and dispensaries have become dilapidated and usually lack the most basic equipment and drugs. These facilities often lack sufficient staff. The effect of these factors is the emergence of newer diseases like HIV/AIDS and old diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and diarrhoea, which are putting greater pressure on the existing healthcare system<sup>2</sup>

The World Health Organisation's constitution over the years recognised and emphasized the need for careful use of scarce resources of information, education and communication as the most cost-effective interventions of health<sup>3</sup>. In Britain and the North America, Merry Peter<sup>4</sup> reported the effectiveness of the use of healthcare information as a cost-

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**Keywords:** *Medical library, Public Health & Science information*

effective intervention for health. The National Library of Medicine in order to support this cause teamed up with Public Libraries to help consumers find Medical answers howbeit via the internet<sup>5</sup>. In Nigeria<sup>6</sup>, research findings have revealed that health information promotions are essential if the citizenry are to have good health, which is prerequisite for progress.

A lot of information exists in medical research libraries all over Nigeria which when harnessed and made available to people in a form they can understand would enable them take better care of their health, prevent disease and cope effectively without many problems. However, few have access to health information, and fewer will understand these scientific data no matter how sound because of medical terminologies. This may have been at the back of the mind of Umaru and Coloman<sup>7</sup> when they asked the Nigerian Universities to identify and work out possible solutions of needs of urban and rural communities. Since the mass media whose primary role is to disseminate information is usually urban based and cater mostly for the urban population whose needs they understand, reaching the rural audiences and urban ghettos have become a challenge. This fact buttresses Sturges, P. & Richard Nell's<sup>8</sup> position that creating a library model that is less formal, less book oriented, more locally rooted, and more precisely targeted at Africa's real potential information users is the challenge now confronting African librarians. Where does the Medical Librarian come in? The answer to this question can be readily found by reviewing the content of the Medical Library. The library already possesses basic health information documents in the form of books, journals, and audio-visual materials like slides, videocassettes and computer software's like diskettes and CD-ROM. The

Medical Library also has professional Librarians with diverse subjects background. Thus, the challenge lies with being able to identify the specific health information needed by this audience and meeting it.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Questionnaires were administered after pretesting and corrections made, to all librarians of four health science institutions of College of Medicine University of Lagos, Nigerian Institute of Medical Research, Central Medical Library and West African Postgraduate College of Medicine. In all thirty questionnaires were administered and twenty seven were returned duly completed. This represents 90% of the questionnaires administered. The questionnaires which had eight questions was designed to find out the respondents attitude and views on how to identify specific health information needs for a particular community and the best strategies for meeting the information needs. The medium which is best suited for meeting the need of the average person within the community and the necessity, if any for setting up public libraries within the communities.

## **RESULTS**

### **Identifying specific health information needs**

Findings from this study revealed that most health science librarians (92%) had positive attitude to librarians participating in disseminating public health information in Nigeria.

The question on the best methods for identifying specific health information needs of a given population resulted in the following replies as contained in figure 1. Sixty three percent of the respondents felt the best



source was from health professionals in the hospitals or clinics. Fifty one percent said such information can be gathered from traditional healers. While 30% of the subjects felt such information can be obtained from the general public. The least accepted source for identifying specific health information was observing, by the researcher, the symptoms of sickness manifested by the patients.

### **Strategies for meeting information needs**

The question on the strategies for meeting health information needs of the public attracted the replies as found in table 1. The most popular was that Medical libraries should initiate seminars and workshops where media specialist will meet health professionals and dialogue on the best media to use for efficiently disseminating health information to the target audience. This attracted 60% response. Contributing articles to be published in community newspapers written in vernacular and organizing film/video shows with resources already available in the health science libraries attracted 52% response each. Extension of library services to the public also attracted 40% response while those interviewed did not think it was necessary for libraries to report health information with the assistance of subject specialists in pidgin English or indigenous languages. They also felt that health librarians should not involve themselves with the crusade of ensuring that every public school has a library.

### **Best Media for communicating health information**

The issue of the best media for communicating health information to the public resulted in the answers as reported on figure 2. Eighty one percent said the best way is through the use of Audio-visual aids. Sixty

seven percent on the other hand, felt the use of posters will do the magic. Most health science librarians did not think the use of statistics will be useful.

### **Public library**

Most of the respondents (92%) believed it was a good idea for the health sciences librarians to lead a crusade to mobilize the leaders of communities to donate lands and buildings to house public libraries. However, many through their comments indicated that the librarians will still have to make extra efforts at equipping the libraries through individual and institutional donations of books and other resources. They also suggested that the Librarians solicit on gratis health materials from local and international institutions.

### **Discussion**

Majority of the respondents agreed that the best method for identifying specific health information needs of a given population was through health professionals in hospitals and clinics in the area under study. This means that for the health science librarians to be able to give the appropriate health information to any given community the health information needs is best established by liaising with the health professionals and traditional healers in the area. Even though asking the people of their health problems was not the first choice of respondents, it is interesting to note that as many as thirty percent felt that the people should be consulted. This supports the view of WHO<sup>9</sup> that an effective information campaign must start with the assumption that the public knows best what their problems are and what they need in order to cope with them.

The librarians also said the best strategy for meeting these information needs is by

organizing workshops/seminars where media specialists will dialogue with health professionals on the best method to use for reaching the target audience. This view seems to imply that the practice of giving technical and scientific information to people who will not understand it must be stopped.

The librarians mentioned that the use of audio-visuals was the best way to communicate health information to the public. This view gives the impression that health librarians are thinking of using the materials already available in their libraries for this purpose. The establishment of public libraries in each community had a majority support from the respondents who were of the view that creating the awareness and mobilising the leaders of the communities to donate land or buildings to house a library was the best way to sustain knowledge already acquired. The library materials were to be sourced on gratis from health institution, philanthropic organisations and public spirited individuals. The establishment of these public libraries will provide storage for health information documents and provide easy access to individuals at their own time and pace for personal use. This way the acquired knowledge is re-inforced.

## CONCLUSION

The health science librarians of four Institutions were surveyed, and the result revealed that they supported the idea of the Medical Library providing health information contained in the library to the urban and rural population. They suggested that health Libraries should meet the information needs of this population by identifying the information needs through health professionals in the hospitals and clinics of the area. The Librarians also requested their colleagues to organise workshops and seminars which will bring health professionals and media practitioners together to dialogue and decide on the best media for health information to this target group. Majority of the libraries also supported the establishment of public libraries in every community.

*Thus, health information for the urban and the rural population is fundamental to healthcare. It is possibly the most cost-effective way to improve the quality of healthcare in Nigeria.*



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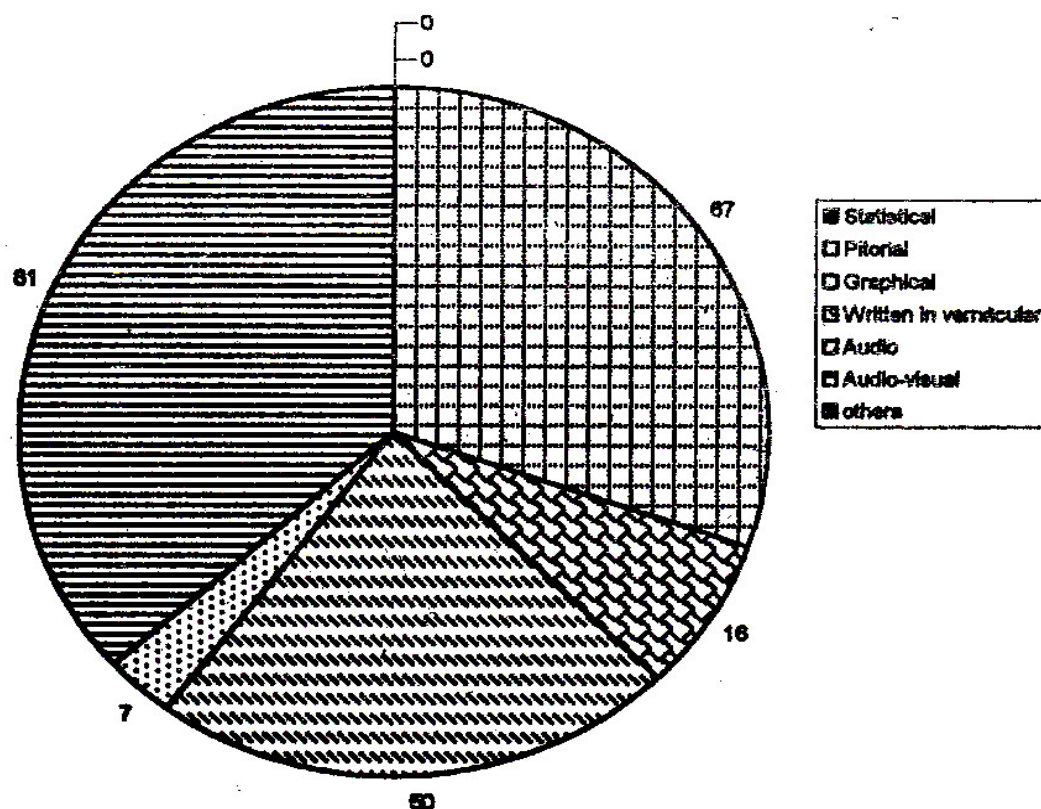
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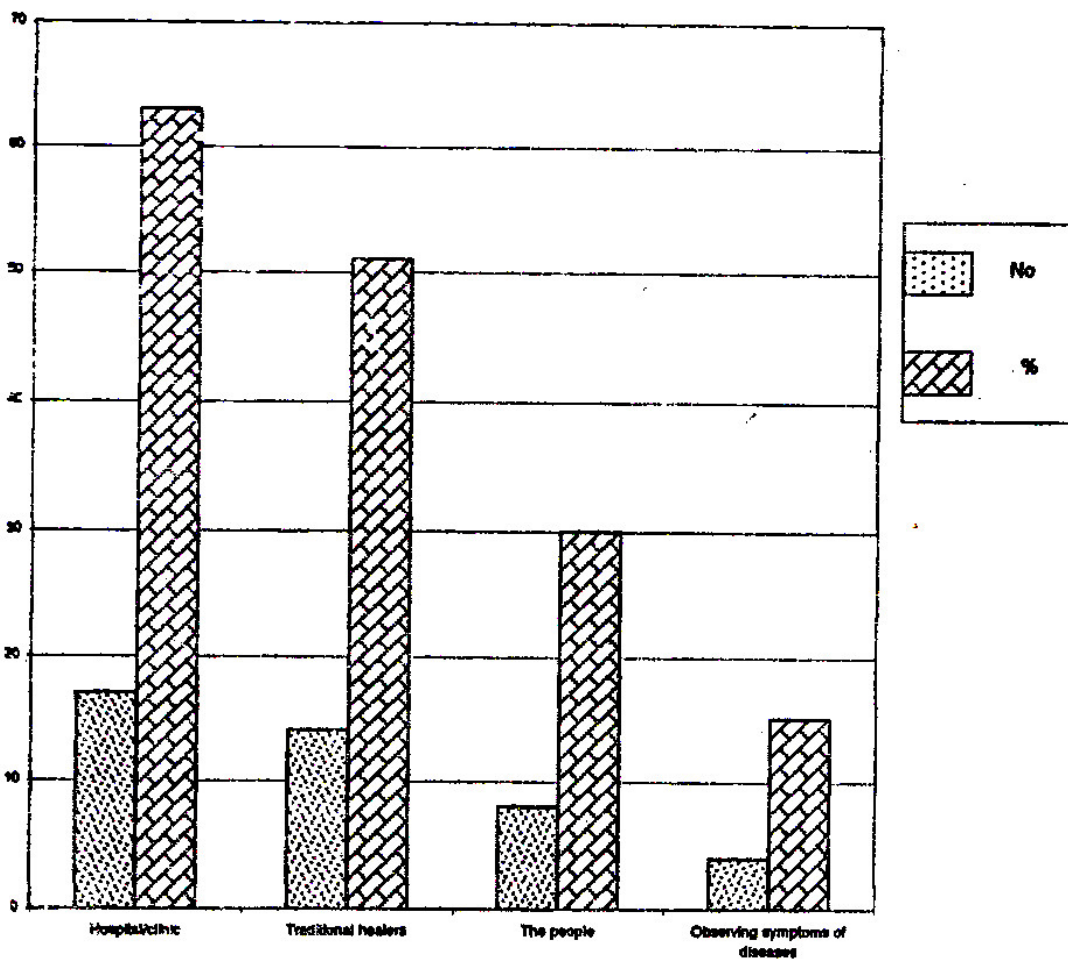
**Table 1: Strategies for meeting health information needs of the Public**

Services	No	%
a. Traditional library service	8	33
b. Library news bulletin	8	30
c. Extension of library service to the public	19	40
d. Establishment of public/community libraries	8	30
e. Translation of medical document to vernacular	10	37
f. Publish articles in community newspaper	14	52
g. Give town crier health information	9	33
h. Organising exhibitions	9	33
i. Health posters	9	33
j. Reporting health documents in pidgin English		-
k. Film-shows	14	52
l. Encouraging the establishment of libraries in public schools through NLA	-	-
m. Workshops for media specialist & health professionals	17	63

**Figure 2: Best Media for communicating health information**



**Figure 1: Sources for identifying specific health information needs**



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## APPENDIX 1

### Survey of Potentials of health science libraries in Public Health information in Nigeria.

1. Name of Institution
2. Highest qualification of respondent
3. How would you describe your attitude to public health information. Positive  
Negative
4. What do you consider to the best method for identifying specific health information need of a given population
  - a. by asking health professionals in hospitals and clinics within the area
  - b. by asking traditional healers operating in the area
  - c. by asking the people the disease suffered by people of the area
  - d. by observing symptoms of disease suffered by people of the area
5. Please indicate which of the under-listed strategies you considered best in meeting information needs of the public
  - a. offering traditional library services
  - b. making available library news letters/ bulletin available to the public
  - c. extension of library service to the general public
  - d. lead crusade for the establishment of community libraries
  - e. translation of relevant medical library materials into indigenous languages
  - f. contributing public awareness articles to community news papers
  - g. liaising with town criers to give health information to local communities
  - h. organising exhibitions for the public
  - i. preparing health posters
  - j. reporting health documents in pidgin English
  - k. organising film shows with existing health materials in library
  - l. leading a crusade for the establishment of school libraries in all public schools
  - m. organising workshops where medical specialists & health professional will dialogue on the best medial for efficient dissemination of health informationother (please state)
6. What medium of information is best suited for communicating health information to the urban and rural poor
  - a. statistical
  - b. pictorial
  - c. graphical
  - d. written in vernacular
  - e. audio
  - f. audio visual
  - g. others
7. Do you support the idea of health science libraries leading the crusades of establishing community libraries.  
Yes      No
8. Please make free comments\_\_\_\_\_