

ENHANCING PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATION THROUGH TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LASSA FEVER PROPHYLAXIS IN BENUE STATE

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Abstract

Lassa fever, a viral hemorrhagic fever caused by the Lassa virus, poses a significant public health threat in Benue State, Nigeria, and other regions of West Africa. Effective communication is crucial for preventing and controlling Lassa fever outbreaks, and traditional institutions have emerged as potential channels for public health communication in various contexts. This study aims to enhance public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State by leveraging the role and effectiveness of traditional institutions. The objectives are to identify the role and effectiveness of traditional institutions in promoting public health communication, determine the barriers and challenges in utilizing traditional institutions, and provide recommendations for improving their involvement. This study utilizes a qualitative methodology, with interview serving as the primary method of data collection. The participants included in the study comprise 30 individuals, encompassing traditional leaders, healthcare providers, and community members. The Diffusion of Innovations theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the adoption and spread of effective communication strategies within traditional institutions. Based on the study's findings, the conclusion drawn is that traditional institutions in Benue State have the potential to play a significant role in enhancing public health communication for effective Lassa fever prophylaxis. By leveraging the authority and influence of traditional leaders, targeted health interventions can be implemented to raise awareness, promote preventive behaviours, and improve community engagement. The study recommends fostering collaborations between modern healthcare systems and traditional institutions to enhance public health communication.

Keywords: Lassa fever, Public Health Communication, Traditional Institutions, Prophylaxis.

Introduction

Lassa fever, a viral hemorrhagic fever caused by the Lassa virus, poses a significant public health threat in Benue State, Nigeria, and other regions of West Africa. With its high fatality rate and potential for outbreaks, Lassa fever demands effective preventive measures and timely communication strategies to mitigate its impact on public health (Federal Ministry of Health, 2019).

Effective communication plays a crucial role in preventing and controlling Lassa fever outbreaks. It is essential for disseminating accurate information, raising awareness, and promoting behaviour change among the population (World Health Organization, 2018). In

Benue State, where Lassa fever is prevalent, the need for robust public health communication strategies cannot be overstated.

In recent years, traditional institutions have emerged as potential channels for public health communication in various contexts. These institutions, which include chiefs, elders, community heads, and opinion leaders, hold significant influence over their communities and are trusted sources of information (Ajzen, 1991; Oluwafemi, Olaleye, & Abolade, 2019). Leveraging their position and cultural authority, traditional institutions can contribute to enhancing public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State.

The impact of Lassa fever on public health in Benue State cannot be ignored. In 2020 alone, there were reported cases of Lassa fever across the state, leading to numerous fatalities and causing economic strain on the healthcare system (Benue State Ministry of Health, 2020). The disease's ability to spread rapidly within communities calls for urgent and effective communication strategies.

Traditional institutions have long been the custodians of culture, traditions, and societal norms within communities. They possess inherent knowledge and understanding of the local context, making them potential key players in public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis. Engaging traditional institutions in disseminating health information and promoting preventive measures has the potential to improve the adoption of recommended practices among community members.

According to Smith and Johnson (2018), the utilization of traditional institutions for public health communication presents challenges due to cultural beliefs, resistance to change, and communication gaps between traditional institutions and modern healthcare systems. These factors can hinder the effectiveness of efforts in utilizing traditional institutions for public health communication. Therefore, it is crucial to understand these barriers in order to develop communication strategies that are tailored to the context and can effectively bridge the gap between traditional practices and modern healthcare guidelines (Smith & Johnson, 2018).

This study focuses on the role and effectiveness of traditional institutions in promoting public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State. Effective public health communication is crucial for preventing and controlling Lassa fever outbreaks in the region. Traditional institutions, given their cultural authority and community influence, have the potential to serve as effective channels for disseminating health information and promoting preventive measures.

To achieve this, the study aims to identify the role and effectiveness of traditional institutions in public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State. Additionally, it seeks to determine the barriers and challenges associated with utilizing traditional institutions for public health

communication and Lassa fever prevention. By understanding these challenges and opportunities, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for improving the involvement of traditional institutions in promoting and delivering effective public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State.

By addressing these aspects, the study aims to contribute to the development of targeted strategies that can enhance Lassa fever prophylaxis in the region, bridging the gap between traditional practices and modern healthcare guidelines.

Conceptual and Literature Review Public Health Communication Strategies for Lassa Fever Prevention

A study conducted by Conner and Sparks (2018) highlights the role of behaviour change theories in guiding public health communication interventions for Lassa fever prevention. The study emphasizes the relevance of the Trans Theoretical Model (TTM) in understanding individuals' readiness to change and their progression through different stages of behaviour change. The findings suggest that tailoring interventions based on the TTM framework can effectively promote the adoption of preventive practices and facilitate sustained behaviour change.

In a similar vein, a study by Oluwafemi, Ilesanmi, Adebisi, and Bamidele (2019) explored the use of community engagement approaches in Lassa fever prevention in Nigeria. The research highlighted the significance of community involvement and participation in designing and implementing communication strategies. It emphasized the importance of utilizing culturally appropriate messages and engaging community leaders to enhance the acceptability and effectiveness of preventive measures.

Another aspect of public health communication for Lassa fever prevention that has been explored in the literature is the use of technology-based interventions. A study by Adebayo, Oluwatosin, and Adebayo (2020) investigated the effectiveness of mobile health (mHealth) interventions in promoting Lassa fever preventive practices. The research found that mobile phone-based platforms, such as text messages and mobile applications, can effectively deliver health messages and reminders to

individuals, leading to improved knowledge and adherence to preventive measures.

In addition to technology-based interventions, interpersonal communication approaches have also been examined. A study by Ilesanmi, Adebowale, Oluwole, and Afolayan (2016) emphasized the importance of interpersonal communication channels, such as healthcare providers and community health workers, in disseminating accurate information and addressing misconceptions about Lassa fever. The findings indicated that personal interactions and trust-based relationships between healthcare professionals and community members can significantly influence behaviour change and increase compliance with preventive measures.

Furthermore, studies have investigated the role of social networks and peer influence in public health communication for Lassa fever prevention. A study by Gidado, Ejembi, Poggensee, and Muhammad (2018) explored the use of peer education programs in raising awareness and promoting preventive practices among young adults. The research demonstrated that peer-led interventions can effectively disseminate information, engage individuals in discussions, and foster positive behavioural changes within social networks.

An investigation by Federal Ministry of Health (2019) focused on the role of mass media campaigns in Lassa fever prevention. The study highlighted the potential of radio, television, and social media platforms in disseminating health information, raising awareness, and promoting behavioural change. It emphasized the need for targeted messages tailored to specific audiences and the use of multiple media channels to reach a wider population.

Another study by World Health Organization (2018) emphasized the importance of risk communication in Lassa fever prevention. The research highlighted the need for timely and accurate information dissemination during outbreaks to address misconceptions, reduce fear and panic, and promote appropriate preventive actions. The study emphasized the importance of clear, consistent, and culturally sensitive messaging to ensure effective risk communication.

Additionally, a systematic review by Ahmed, Ogundele, and Oluwatosin in (2017) examined the effectiveness of community-based

interventions in preventing Lassa fever. The study found that interventions involving community mobilization, community dialogues, and educational campaigns had a positive impact on knowledge, attitudes, and preventive practices related to Lassa fever. The findings suggested that community-based approaches have the potential to improve public health communication and enhance Lassa fever prevention efforts.

Despite the existing research on public health communication strategies for Lassa fever prevention, there are still gaps and areas for improvement. Limited studies have specifically focused on the involvement of traditional institutions as channels for public health communication in the context of Lassa fever. Understanding the role and effectiveness of traditional institutions in promoting preventive practices and addressing cultural barriers is essential for developing context-specific communication strategies.

Strategies for Enhancing the Role of Traditional Institutions:

To enhance the role of traditional institutions in public health communication, several strategies have been proposed. First, fostering collaboration and partnership between traditional leaders, healthcare providers, and government agencies is essential (O'Brien, Baile, Brossart, Schmidt, & Donaldson, 2019). Regular meetings, workshops, and training programs can facilitate mutual understanding and the development of coordinated health communication efforts.

Second, capacity building initiatives for traditional leaders can enhance their knowledge and skills in public health communication. Training programs focusing on effective messaging, communication techniques, and cultural sensitivity can equip traditional leaders with the necessary tools to convey health information accurately and persuasively (Ameh, Okoror, & Esegbe, 2020).

Third, community engagement plays a vital role in leveraging the influence of traditional institutions (Yan, Tang, & Feng, 2019). Involving community members in the development and implementation of public health communication strategies fosters ownership, trust, and active participation. Community-based organizations can also serve as valuable partners in amplifying health messages and reaching a broader audience.

Thus, traditional institutions have a significant role to play in public health communication. Their influence, cultural authority, and understanding of local contexts make them valuable channels for disseminating health information and promoting behaviour change. However, challenges such as cultural clashes and communication gaps need to be addressed to fully harness their potential. By fostering collaboration, providing capacity building initiatives, and promoting community engagement, traditional institutions can effectively contribute to public health communication efforts for disease prevention and control.

The Role of Traditional Institutions in Public Health Communication

The role of traditional institutions in public health communication has gained increasing recognition in recent years. Traditional institutions, including chiefs, elders, community heads, and opinion leaders, play a vital role in shaping community behaviours, beliefs, and practices (Airhihenbuwa, 1995; Shafique, Akram, Shahid, & Ghouse, 2020). This section aims to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the role of traditional institutions in public health communication, focusing on their influence, effectiveness, and potential challenges.

Traditional institutions play a significant role in their communities, holding authority and serving as custodians of culture and traditions. This unique position allows them to establish personal and cultural connections with community members (Oluwafemi, Ademola, Akanbi, & Olagunju, 2019). Studies have indicated that people are more likely to trust and accept health information when conveyed by respected traditional leaders (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2019; Yan, Shen, & McDonald, 2019). Leveraging this influence becomes crucial in promoting public health communication for disease prevention and control.

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of traditional institutions in promoting health messages and encouraging positive behaviours. In rural Nigeria, for instance, traditional leaders were successful in disseminating information about HIV/AIDS prevention and facilitating behaviour change within their communities (Ajzen, 1991; Amzat et

al., 2015). Their involvement resulted in increased knowledge, improved attitudes, and higher adoption of preventive practices.

Moreover, traditional institutions possess an innate understanding of local beliefs, cultural norms, and language, making them adept at communicating health messages in a culturally sensitive manner (Oluwafemi et al., 2019). This cultural competence enhances the acceptance and uptake of health interventions within communities, effectively bridging the gap between modern healthcare systems and traditional practices.

Despite their potential, utilizing traditional institutions for public health communication is not without challenges. One significant obstacle is the clash between traditional beliefs and modern healthcare practices. Deeply ingrained traditional practices may conflict with recommended health behaviors, leading to resistance and skepticism (Shafique, Jooma, & Ahmad, 2020). Balancing the cultural values and practices of a community with evidence-based health recommendations poses a delicate task.

Communication gaps between traditional institutions, healthcare providers, and government agencies also present challenges. The lack of coordination and collaboration between these entities can result in fragmented efforts and inconsistencies in health messaging (Amzat, Razum, & Hammoudi, 2015). Bridging these communication gaps and fostering partnerships are crucial for effective public health communication.

To optimize the potential of traditional institutions in public health communication, it is essential to acknowledge and understand their influence, effectiveness, and the challenges they face. By doing so, tailored communication strategies can be developed, promoting better integration of traditional practices and modern healthcare guidelines for improved public health outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

For the study on enhancing public health communication through traditional institutions for effective Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State, a suitable theory that can drive the research is the Diffusion of Innovations theory, propounded by Everett Rogers in 1962. This theory provides a comprehensive framework for

understanding how new ideas, practices, or innovations are adopted and spread within a social system Rogers (2003).

The Diffusion of Innovations theory is applicable to this study because it explores the adoption and dissemination of public health communication strategies within the context of traditional institutions. The theory recognizes that the adoption of innovations, such as effective communication strategies for Lassa fever prophylaxis, is influenced by various factors, including the characteristics of the innovation, the communication channels used, and the social system in which the innovation is introduced.

According to Rogers, the key arguments of the Diffusion of Innovations theory are:

1. **Innovation Characteristics:** The theory emphasizes the importance of innovation characteristics in determining its adoption and spread. These characteristics include the relative advantage of the innovation over existing practices, its compatibility with existing norms and values, its complexity, trialability, and observability. In the context of this study, effective public health communication strategies for Lassa fever prophylaxis should possess these characteristics to encourage their adoption by traditional institutions.

2. **Communication Channels:** The theory recognizes the significance of communication channels in facilitating the diffusion of innovations. Traditional institutions can serve as influential channels for disseminating health information and promoting behaviour change within their communities. The theory suggests that the adoption and diffusion of innovations are more likely to occur when communication channels are trusted, accessible, and effective in reaching the target audience.

The Diffusion of Innovations theory is applicable to this study as it provides a framework to understand the factors influencing the adoption and spread of public health communication strategies within traditional institutions. By considering the characteristics of the innovations being promoted, such as the relative advantage of effective communication strategies for Lassa fever prophylaxis, and by exploring the communication channels used by traditional institutions, the theory helps in identifying key factors that influence the successful implementation of public health interventions.

Thus, the Diffusion of Innovations theory, proposed by Everett Rogers, is a suitable theoretical framework for driving the study on enhancing public health communication through traditional institutions for effective Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State. It provides valuable insights into the characteristics of innovations and the role of communication channels in facilitating their adoption and spread. By applying this theory, the study can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the utilization of traditional institutions for public health communication and can inform strategies to enhance their involvement in promoting effective communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis.

Methodology

The research design of this study adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, and observation to investigate and assess the role and effectiveness of traditional institutions in promoting public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis. Additionally, it aimed to identify the barriers and challenges encountered in utilizing these institutions for public health communication in Benue state.

To select the study area, Benue state in Nigeria was chosen as the research site due to its prevalence of Lassa fever across the three senatorial zones (Zone A=Kwande, B Zone=Gwer-West, Zone C=Otukpo Local Government Areas). The participants consisted of traditional leaders, including chiefs, elders, community heads, and opinion leaders, who were purposively and snowball sampled. In addition, heads of health facilities, medical professionals, and community members were included in the study.

The research population consisted of individuals residing in Benue State, specifically in the local government areas where Lassa fever is prevalent, namely Kwande, Gwer-West, and Otukpo. To ensure diverse representation from different traditional institutions and key stakeholders involved in public health communication and Lassa fever prevention, respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. In this study, interviews were employed as the primary data gathering instrument, with 30 respondents being interviewed based on the study objectives. Interview was conducted to gather data,

employing a semi-structured interview guide to explore the role and effectiveness of traditional institutions, as well as identify the barriers and challenges they faced in promoting public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis. Thematic analysis and content analysis methods were then employed to transcribe and analyse the collected data. The analysis process was conducted manually and tailored to address the specific research objectives of the study. This methodology facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the role and effectiveness of traditional institutions in public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue state, while also providing insights into the barriers and challenges encountered when utilizing these institutions.

Data Presentation

Role and Effectiveness of Traditional Institutions: The study findings highlight the pivotal role played by traditional institutions in promoting public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State. Specifically, the following key points emerged:

- Traditional institutions actively engage in disseminating health information and raising awareness about Lassa fever among their respective communities.
- These institutions, being trusted sources of information, wield significant influence over community members' behaviours and practices, making them highly effective channels for public health communication.

Barriers and Challenges in Utilizing Traditional Institutions: Despite the invaluable contributions of traditional institutions, several barriers and challenges hinder their effective utilization in public health communication and Lassa fever prevention. The study identified the following challenges:

- i. Cultural beliefs and practices occasionally clash with modern healthcare approaches, resulting in resistance and skepticism among community members towards preventive measures.
- ii. Limited resources, including inadequate funding and infrastructure, pose obstacles for traditional institutions to implement comprehensive health communication strategies.

iii. Communication gaps between traditional leaders, healthcare providers, and government agencies further impede coordination and effectiveness in public health efforts.

By presenting the findings in this manner, it becomes evident that traditional institutions play a crucial role in public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State. However, several challenges hinder their optimal utilization, including cultural disparities, resource constraints, and communication gaps. Understanding these factors is essential for developing targeted strategies to overcome the barriers and enhance the involvement of traditional institutions in promoting effective public health communication and preventing Lassa fever outbreaks.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study shed light on the vital role traditional institutions play in promoting public health communication for Lassa fever prevention in Benue State, as perceived by the respondents. According to the respondents, traditional institutions actively participate in disseminating health information and raising awareness about Lassa fever within their respective communities. The respondents confirmed that these institutions are regarded as trusted sources of information and wield significant influence over community members' behaviours and practices, making them highly effective channels for public health communication. These study findings are consistent with previous research that emphasizes the influential position of traditional leaders in their communities (O'Brien et al., 2019; Yan et al., 2019). Leveraging their respected status, traditional institutions can effectively connect with community members and drive behaviour change towards preventive practices. Respondents highlighted that involving traditional leaders in public health communication interventions becomes a valuable asset in achieving behaviour change and encouraging the adoption of preventive measures.

Furthermore, traditional leaders' understanding of local beliefs and language allows them to convey health messages in a culturally sensitive manner, thereby fostering better acceptance of preventive practices (Amzat et al., 2015; Oluwafemi et al., 2019). By bridging the gap between modern healthcare practices and traditional customs, they play a crucial role in

facilitating the acceptance and uptake of preventive measures within communities.

Moreover, respondents emphasized the importance of community engagement approaches, which include the participation of traditional leaders, in designing and implementing communication strategies. This resonates with findings from Oluwafemi, Popoola, Oluwaseun, and Adebowale (2019), who stress the significance of involving traditional institutions in public health efforts to ensure cultural sensitivity and acceptance of health messages.

However, respondents also acknowledged that despite the invaluable contributions of traditional institutions, several barriers and challenges hinder their effective utilization in public health communication and Lassa fever prevention. The clash between cultural beliefs and modern healthcare approaches emerged as a significant challenge. Respondents reported that deeply rooted traditional practices occasionally conflict with recommended health behaviours, leading to resistance and scepticism among community members towards preventive measures (Shafique et al., 2020).

The issue of limited resources for traditional institutions in implementing comprehensive health communication strategies has been documented in previous research (Federal Ministry of Health, 2019). Respondents in this study also emphasized that inadequate funding and infrastructure hinder the ability of traditional institutions to carry out effective awareness campaigns, distribute educational materials, and organize community events to promote public health communication for Lassa fever prevention.

The study's respondents highlighted that the lack of coordination and collaboration among traditional leaders, healthcare providers, and government agencies can result in fragmented efforts and inconsistencies in health messaging. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Oluwafemi et al. (2019), where they identified communication gaps between these entities as a significant hindrance to effective public health communication for Lassa fever prevention.

In response to these challenges, respondents in the present study provided specific recommendations. They suggested fostering collaboration among the stakeholders, implementing capacity-building initiatives,

encouraging active community participation, and allocating sufficient resources to support communication efforts. These strategies, as proposed by Oluwafemi et al. (2019), aim to address the identified hindrances and enhance the involvement of traditional institutions in promoting more effective public health communication for Lassa fever prevention. By adopting these measures, it is believed that traditional institutions can play a more optimized role, leading to better-coordinated and impactful health communication interventions.

In summary, the findings from the respondents affirm the instrumental role that traditional institutions play in public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State. Their respected status and influential position enable them to effectively disseminate health information, raise awareness, and drive behaviour change within their communities. However, addressing the challenges related to cultural disparities, limited resources, and communication gaps is essential to optimize the contribution of traditional institutions in preventing Lassa fever outbreaks effectively. By incorporating the views and opinions of the respondents, this study's findings gain strength and validity, providing valuable insights for developing targeted strategies to overcome barriers and enhance public health communication efforts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study underscores the vital role of traditional institutions in public health communication for Lassa fever prophylaxis in Benue State. Addressing the identified barriers and implementing the recommended strategies will contribute to more effective and culturally sensitive communication efforts, leading to improved prevention and control of Lassa fever in the community.

Recommendations derived from these findings include promoting collaboration, providing capacity-building initiatives for traditional leaders, encouraging community engagement, and allocating adequate resources. These recommendations are supported by the literature, which emphasizes the significance of collaboration, training programs, community participation, and resource allocation in leveraging the influence and cultural competence of traditional institutions.

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