

Assessing the role of the media in the prevention and control of meningitis in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria has high numbers of meningitis cases and related fatalities almost every year. This study explored the role of the media in meningitis campaigns using a documentary method of data gathering and analysis. The research objectives were to determine if the media played a positive role in campaigns against meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria and to determine the major obstacles to media coverage of meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria. The results revealed that the role of the media in Nigeria during meningitis outbreaks is positive and supportive. However, paid advertisements and announcements that support the media in health promotion campaigns were undermined by limited understanding of infectious diseases by politicians and some media sponsors. Therefore, the authors recommend the establishment of a permanent funded media structure charged with the responsibility of grassroots campaigns against meningitis, and the integration of the media into committees formed to combat the disease.

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Keywords

Media, media sensitisation, meningitis, Nigeria, public health committee, health campaign, disease outbreak, documentary method, disease prevention

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Introduction

The media is a powerful instrument with which to influence health behaviours linked to viral transmission and infection. Mass media (e.g. television, radio), print media (e.g. magazines and newspapers) and new media (e.g. the Internet, mobile phones, search engine news sites and other forms of social media) have been used to convey targeted messages about health risks and raise health awareness. Media messages provide information about factors such as disease outbreaks, symptoms, modes of transmission, fatality rates, treatment centres, drugs and prevention methods. Media messages can be transmitted for either short or long durations, can be attached to other organised programmes, such as institutional outreach, and may complement policy changes.¹ The primary purpose of media campaigns during disease outbreaks is to elicit population behaviour change, which leads to disease prevention and control. However, the effectiveness of such campaigns in achieving this goal depends on message precision and clarity,² the degree of funding, the media environment, use of appropriate language and the audience's ability to implement behaviour change.³

Meningitis is a major health problem in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole.⁴ The number of meningitis infections and fatalities is growing annually, despite efforts to control the disease.⁴ Media involvement in the prevention and control of meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria is inevitable; however, the role of the media in the control and

prevention of meningitis in Nigeria, and the associated challenges, have not been adequately measured. Thus, this paper explores the role of the media in the prevention and control of meningitis in Nigeria, focusing on northern Nigeria. This study was conducted to answer the following questions: Has the media played a positive and supportive role in meningitis campaigns in Nigeria? What are the major obstacles to media coverage of meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria?

Method

This study used a documentary method of data gathering and analysis⁵ to explore the involvement of the media in meningitis campaigns. The authors extracted information from newspapers, journal articles and grey literatures. The broad search areas were meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria, news about Nigerian meningitis, and meningitis updates in Nigeria. We searched for relevant materials on Google, PubMed and Scopus databases from February 2018 to June 2018. There were no specific search inclusion or exclusion criteria. The authors independently extracted data from the reports.

Results and discussion

The role of the media in controlling meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria

Our documentary search and analysis of information obtained from the reviewed

literature showed that the Nigerian media can autonomously or complementarily play educative, supportive, promotional and supplemental roles^{6,7} in the control and prevention of meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria. In addition, we found that several Nigerian media formats have reported on meningitis in different parts of the country, focusing on meningitis outbreaks, causes, symptoms, number of deaths, preventive measures, treatments, outbreak response strategies and preparedness, and opinions about the disease.⁸⁻¹⁰ One Nigerian study reported that the media exerted a positive influence on the prevention of meningitis among residents in one Nigerian state.¹¹ Thus, the role of the media in meningitis prevention and control in Nigeria cannot be overstated. The media plays an important role in meningitis prevention and control in Nigeria by providing information and dispelling myths about the disease.^{12,13} These results indicate that the media plays a positive and supportive role during meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria.

Major obstacles to media coverage of meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria

One of the media outlets available to and accessed by the Nigerian public, the Public Health Committee Services (PHCS), sends health promotion information to the public through text messages. Such messages lack detailed information about meningitis outbreaks, transmission, prevention and treatment. Similarly, the PHCS uses radio jingles to alert people about disease and environmental cleanups. However, the PHCS has not liaised with the mass media and health professionals to create programmes that provide detailed information about meningitis. The PHCS has not dedicated specific efforts to meningitis outbreaks across the 19 states of northern Nigeria, nor has it created channels to enable public reporting of suspected cases

of the disease. There is no sponsorship by the government or individual groups for such programmes or for online media chat facilities.

Paid advertisements and announcements that could support the media in health promotion campaigns are undermined by limited understanding of infectious diseases by politicians and some media sponsors. For example, the governor of a Nigerian state with one of the highest number of meningitis cases in northern Nigeria asserted that the meningitis outbreak was caused by people's refusal to stop their corrupt behaviour and was God's way of showing his anger with Nigerians for turning their backs on him.¹⁴ Such notions have a negative impact on budgets that enable public health agencies to use state media facilities to increase awareness and education about meningitis and to mobilise the public against outbreaks. This undermines media advocacy and sensitisation about disease surveillance, emergencies and responses. Most of the technocrats in the 19 northern Nigerian states are averse to reporting disease outbreaks, particularly if funds had been allocated for outbreak prevention campaigns that had not been implemented. Because meningitis cases are increasing despite funding, such individuals fear possible queries and pressure from international donors, which may attract audits of donor fund expenditure.¹⁵ This increases the likelihood that they will ignore new or multiple cases and fail to report them.

Conclusion

The media is a useful instrument with which to sensitise and mobilise the public about desired changes in health behaviour. The media plays a useful and supportive role during meningitis outbreaks in Nigeria. However, paid advertisements and announcements that support the media in health promotion campaigns are

undermined by limited understanding of infectious diseases by politicians and some media sponsors.

Recommendations

Given the observed challenges faced by the Nigerian media regarding meningitis prevention and control, the authors recommend the establishment of a permanent funded media structure charged with the responsibility of grassroots campaigns against meningitis in Nigeria. Media institutions should be integrated into all organisations and committees charged with planning, controlling and preventing outbreaks of the disease. Media programmes on meningitis should be communicated in different native Nigerian languages for easy comprehension.

Declaration of conflicting interest


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