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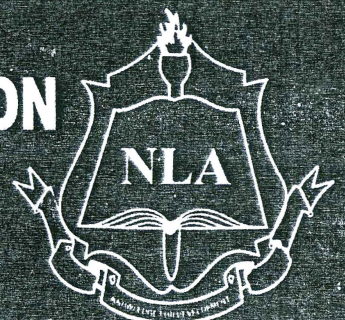
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The Challenges of Academic Libraries in Providing Consumer Health Information on HIV/AIDS to Undergraduate Students in Nigeria

Professional Practice

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Keywords

Abstract

HIV/AIDS has remained a big malaise, particularly in developing countries where young people especially between the age bracket of 15 and 35 continue to succumb to it. The major reason why this epidemic has been relentless in its growth, is lack of accurate information dissemination on the disease. Librarians, because of their knowledge and training in identification, selection, organization, and dissemination of information can play a crucial role in HIV/AIDS information provision to their clients. This article examines the challenges of providing of Consumer Health Information (CHI) on HIV/AIDS in academic libraries in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Information is the bases of education and education is currently the only weapon available to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS and to foster empathy towards individuals already affected by the disease. Information enlightens the general public about the true nature of HIV/AIDS.

Librarians, because of their knowledge and training, identification, selection, organization, and dissemination of information, play a vital role in consumer health information provision, particularly HIV/AIDS information provision to its clients. Health information provision in libraries is very valuable and libraries are important health information providers. One of the biggest challenges for today's librarians is insatiable consumer demand for health information. This is because, in most hospitals in Nigeria, the average time, which a patient is allowed with a doctor, is between 7 and 12 minutes. Therefore, with limited time to ask questions in the hospital, the other alternative place open to students to seek information and seek answers to health related queries unabated is the library.

The library, therefore, has the implicit responsibility of providing the right information to the right people at the right time.

In Nigeria, consumer health information provision in libraries is usually a big challenge; this is because of the dearth of resources available in most of the libraries. Komolafe (1994) laments this trend, when she opines that there is a big problem with health assessment, and very limited disease control programmes in developing countries generally and in Nigeria in particular. This is due to poor background data and unreliable mechanisms of data collection, that is, inadequate library health information service. Most libraries in Nigeria, therefore, because of lack of funds have often precluded this all-important area of librarianship. HIV/AIDS information to library patrons is so crucial because of the nature of the disease and how it has grown relentlessly through the years. HIV/AIDS has remained socially and economically devastating to the country as young people mostly between the age bracket of 15 and 35 continue to succumb to it, thus, resulting in loss of energetic manpower. Education and dissemination of information to library clientele is seen as the most powerful weapon in the fight against the scourge. Also in Nigeria, as in other developing countries, information is very crucial. This is because, on the average, people cannot easily afford books and journals, and libraries are usually the place to go for all kinds of information. According to Aiyepoku (1992:) information reduces the users level of uncertainty in a particular decision situation, therefore, information on HIV/AIDS is not only very critical but very urgent with regard to helping people take informed decision. This article, therefore, examines the challenges of providing consumer health information on HIV/AIDS in academic libraries in Nigeria.

WHAT IS CONSUMER HEALTH INFORMATION?

For the purpose of this work Rees (1996) definition of consumer health information is found most applicable. According to him Consumer Health Information (CHI) is information on health and medical topics which include symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of diseases. CHI also includes information on health promotion, preventive medicine and the determinants of health. The aspect of Consumer Health Information focused on in this article is mainly information on HIV/AIDS. This article, therefore, is an inquest into the amount of Consumer Health Information available to undergraduate students of University of Nigeria Nsukka on HIV/AIDS related information.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

HIV/AIDS has had an unprecedented spread with more than 34 million people in Africa currently living with the dreaded disease.. One third of such persons are young people between the ages of 10 and 24. (*Intensifying action against HIV/AIDS in Africa: responding to a development crisis2000:v*). This disease presently accounts for 9 percent of adult deaths from infectious disease in the developing world and this is expected to quadruple by 2020. (*Intensifying action against HIV/AIDS in Africa: responding to a development crisis2000:v*). In Nigeria, according to one of Nigeria's daily's *The Comet* (2002:2), the estimated number of people living with HIV/AIDS is between a whopping 3.5 million to 5 million, and mostly the people between the ages of 15 and 35 years.

Given the age bracket that is hardest hit by the scourge, (ostensibly the age at which most people are in the universities,) therefore, the universities are in a uniquely privileged position, through collaboration in research and the sharing of strategies, information and the experience of best practices, have the potential to be powerful influence for good (Pisani 1999:vii). The library in it's capacity as the "heart" of the university has so much to contribute by way of information dissemination to the host university.

Another study carried out by UNICEF in sub-Saharan Africa reveals that in sub-Saharan Africa, six thousand new infections are recorded every 4 minutes in people between 15 and 24 years. And more than two-thirds of the people living with the disease are females. (UNICEF;UNAIDS;WHO 2002).

The major reason why this epidemic has been relentless in it's growth is because of lack of awareness and accurate information dissemination on the disease and how it spreads. A common-wealth youth programme reports that young people were most times fed with incorrect notions about HIV/AIDS and are usually misinformed about it's method of spread. (Common-wealth currents, 2002-2003:4).

Studies about the benefit of consumer health information to library patrons have been carried out in different parts of the world. Pifalo et al (1997) who did a study on users of consumer health library at Delaware, came out with the following findings:

Users had improved knowledge of health information.

2. Information helped patrons to have a reduced anxiety about health concerns.
3. Information also made the library patrons more knowledgeable, and therefore helped them take more positive action to address health related concerns

A similar study conducted in Kenya on AIDS awareness observed that even though majority of the respondents had heard about HIV/AIDS and it's existence, however, this general knowledge of the disease does not translate into essential knowledge of the disease. This is because, awareness may not necessarily have a significant relation to knowledge. (Nzioka, 1994).

According to Derring (1996) in a focus group he conducted, all groups reported using libraries for general health information needs and 60% of the respondents agreed that libraries were among their preferred sources for health information. Health information got via libraries is usually seen as very valuable and affects health care decisions of patrons to a great extent. Therefore consumer health information provision has become an expanded role which libraries must perform.

The literature reviewed in this work dwelt mostly with libraries in other countries. Most of the work discussed mainly consumer health information dissemination by libraries. There was no effective discussion of HIV/AIDS and the libraries role in disseminating such information to clients nay students who should be the target group as they fall into the age of the highest prevalence. This dearth of information informed the decision to embark on this topic.

Libraries as a Vehicle for HIV/AIDS Information Dissemination to Undergraduate Students

The UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy while thanking the White House for endorsing the release of fifteen billion Dollars emergency bill to tackle AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean affirmed that ""investing in young people is the best strategy we have today for bringing the epidemic under control". According to her, in areas where the spread of HIV/AIDS is declining, it is primarily because young men and women are being given tools and incentives to prevent infection. The above fact lends credence to how important information is in tackling this epidemic. Libraries are significant information agents in meeting the demands for HIV/AIDS information. Knowledge can be used as a veritable form of self empowerment, which is important in

helping students make informed decision regarding sexual behaviour.

In specific terms, the library can play the following role in the propagation of consumer health information with regard to HIV/AIDS. First, the library can build a collection on HIV/AIDS and fully advertise such materials in it. The library's goal should always be to acquire such resources and making such resources readily available at the point of need. Dahlen, (1993) has established that consumer information is of two types: information needed to make informed decisions related to disease prognosis i.e. patient information and information, needed to support a healthy lifestyle. All these should be borne in mind when the HIV/AIDS collection is built. Such materials should include books, journals, magazines, pamphlets CDROMS and Internet resources.

The library should also be involved in current awareness and selective dissemination of information to undergraduate students. This should be implemented mainly in the special collections section of most university libraries. Information should be disseminated both for prevention and for the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle for students who already are infected. Issues of stigmatization of the persons living with HIV/AIDS should also be adequately disseminated.

Networking with other individuals, organizations, agencies both governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) to facilitate resource sharing on HIV/AIDS is very crucial.

Creating and compiling a list of HIV/AIDS information resources that are accessible via the internet, contact persons, programme coordinators, and other national information networks will help students desirous to make such contacts have the necessary information that they need.

The library should also occasionally organize seminars, workshops, symposia and talk shows in the hostels especially, for students who find it difficult to visit the library. Such sections should usually be very interactive. Occasions such as world AIDS day should be celebrated and this should offer the opportunity to deliver detailed lectures and video shows on HIV/AIDS and various issues related to it.

In the universities, during orientation programmes when the fresh men are introduced to the university, a detailed expose of the disease can be driven home to the new students. Promotional materials are crucial for HIV/AIDS dissemination. These are materials such as posters; bookmarks; countertop

displays; flyers; bulletins which deal on the subject matter.

Challenges facing Academic Libraries in Providing Consumer Health Information on HIV/AIDS to Undergraduate Students in Nigeria.

Nigerian's Low socioeconomic status, and a huge population of marginalized people make it extremely vulnerable to the HIV/AIDS. However, inspite of the prevalence of this disease in the country, it has not been given the attention that it so rightly deserves. Most academic libraries do not have a section carved out for HIV/AIDS information. In fact, in Nigeria, only the National library of Nigeria has effectively built a section on HIV/AIDS. This is less than desirable, since libraries, particularly academic libraries, where the youths are predominately represented are significant information agents in meeting the demands for HIV/AIDS materials. Academic libraries have so far not played a pivotal role in educating students about the disease and ways of preventing it's continued spread.

Secondly, consumer health information, particularly HIV/AIDS information has not so far been fully integrated into the mainstream library programme. This is very necessary because in most libraries in developed countries where the disease is not as prevalent, consumer health information particularly HIV/AIDS is a very important aspect of their curriculum.

Budgetary allocation to most academic libraries has constantly been pruned down, as a result, fiscal resources are always very lean. Most libraries have, therefore, been steadily cutting down their allocation to acquisition of library resources. This has severely affected the effective building of HIV/AIDS resources in most academic libraries in Nigeria.

Most staff handling HIV/AIDS programmes in academic libraries are mostly not given specialized training, which should include training as counselors. Training is important because of the sensitive nature of the ailment. Most academic libraries in Nigeria are yet to embark on such training programmes. Again, this is because of lean budgetary allocation and also a lack of concern on the part of library managers to see HIV/AIDS as the epidemic that it is and give it the prompt attention that it deserves. Finally, lack of Internet connectivity has been a great problem of most academic libraries in Nigeria. This has made networking, and resource sharing particularly, resources on HIV/AIDS very difficult for academic libraries in Nigeria. The Internet connectivity is a sine qua non for the effective running and service

rendering to library clients in academic libraries in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Libraries should at all times work towards the goals of producing a healthy society and as well as helping the youths within their constituency in making informed health decisions. This should be placed topmost in the libraries priorities. First of all budgetary allocation of academic libraries should be enhanced to enable libraries acquire enough materials on HIV/AIDS in Nigeria.

A section of academic libraries in Nigeria should house a collection of HIV/AIDS resources. This will expedite the use of such resources.

It is also, important to integrate Consumer Health Information into the library programme in Nigeria. This will help in giving the staff involved, specialized training which will involve counselling training, particularly in the area of HIV/AIDS in consumer health.

Internet connectivity of academic libraries in Nigeria is crucial. The Internet is fast becoming the major source of information dissemination on health related issues in Nigeria. When the Internet connection is made, there will be a need for proper training of students on how to navigate the web and how to get into health related web sites.

CONCLUSION

So far this article has looked at the role of libraries in providing consumer health information on HIV/AIDS as well as the challenges libraries face in doing so. Libraries are custodians of information with the capacity to shape their environment for the benefit of their clients. Libraries and Librarians have a crucial role to play in disseminating information to university students. Many libraries in Nigeria are yet to be alive to this great and important task of disseminating timely information of HIV/AIDS to it's teeming readers.

Limited aggregated information resources are usually not available to empower undergraduates make informed intelligent choices, the library should therefore help by providing information that will help foster a proactive and improved lifestyle.

Finally, the librarian should be seen simply as an expert in identifying and providing information. They are not practicing health professionals and therefore, their role is mainly to provide a range of authoritative materials and also giving referral information to students who may need it, thereby, helping the students to make more informed health decisions.

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