

## ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN PROMOTION OF HEALTH INFORMATION FOR ADDRESSING HEALTH EMERGENCIES

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to describe the role of libraries in health information promotion for addressing health emergencies in our communities. Public health events that may endanger community health are classified as public health emergencies and often deserve the attention of health experts. The paper expresses a personal view on how community libraries can partner with the health agencies in addressing and combating health emergencies. Strategies for positioning the libraries as valuable tools in health emergency and disaster crisis were also highlighted. In times of community health crisis (pandemics or epidemics) people need access to public health information. Access to health emergency information is paramount to community people especially now that we have myriad of daunting health problems such as Lassa fever, Covid-19 and other natural disasters (hurricane storm and flooding) that often ravage most communities and towns. The paper recommends that communities should be equipped, prepared and ready to manage and combat health emergencies and disasters which often occur without signs.

**Keywords:** Libraries, Community, Health emergency, Diseases, Natural disasters

**Paper type:** Conceptual

### **Introduction**

Some public health events that may endanger community health are classified as public health emergencies. They are considered as extraordinary events that really deserve serious health attention by health experts or organizations such as World Health Organization (WHO), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID),

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (formally known as United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2006) defined the word “health” as a state of physical, mental and social well-being in which disease and infirmity are absent. On the other hand, emergency denotes a serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation that requires immediate action or attention.

Public health emergency is defined as emergency need for health care (Medical) services to respond to a disaster (flood disaster, earthquake disaster and other natural disasters), significant outbreak of infectious diseases, bioterrorist attack or other significant catastrophic events (NDMS, 2007). In most developed countries, a public health emergency declaration releases resources to handle an actual or potential public health crisis. Some of the notable emergency health crisis the world has witnessed include: incidence of flooding, severe hurricane storm (Michelle et al., 2013), 2009 swine flu pandemic (Lisi Zach, 2011) and the current COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging most countries of the world (Mohammad and Peter, 2020). Once a public health emergency has been declared in any town, state or community, the concerned health agencies are empowered to use emergency means or strategies to combat the crisis in order to restore or bring health sanity to the affected community.

Information dissemination is one of the ways of achieving this purpose. The library in any community is regarded as an information base centre for storage and retrieval of vital information which could be used for community development, national planning and health crisis intervention.

According to Ogunbode (2004), every community strives at improving the health of its citizen. This assertion by Ogunbode will be better achieved where libraries can partner with the appropriate community health agencies, especially in combating health emergencies that often occur in our communities. Librarians are required to work hand in hand with community health workers to record and store emergency health information on some natural health emergencies (e.g. hurricane storm, flooding, earthquake,) and disease conditions such as swine flu, poliomyelitis, dracunculiasis (Guinea worm), tetanus, tuberculosis, anthrax, HIV/AIDS, Covid-19 etc. Health emergency measures that relate to these conditions are very important for identification and awareness in combating any health crisis in our communities.

Public access to health information is paramount to the developing nations in Africa e.g. Nigeria where communities are ravaged with daunting health problems such as Lassa fever, Covid-19 and some other natural disasters such as hurricane storm and flooding that may affect community health. This paper therefore tries to justify libraries as partners in health information promotion for addressing and combating health emergencies in our communities.

### **State of health information provision for health emergencies by libraries**

Librarians frequently provide information support to various categories of professionals and the public at large. It is important to know that the disaster-related information needs of professionals and ordinary people differ in terms of type and nature of disaster. For example, information needs of

individuals in a flooding crisis or earthquake differ or vary from information needs of individuals in public health epidemic or pandemic. Whichever way, the ultimate goal is to assuage or reduce the impact of the health crisis or disasters on human lives. As a result of this, provision or availability of health information is a component part of disaster management in any community.

Every community should be prepared and ready to manage and combat health emergencies and disaster which often occur without signs. Developed nations are better prepared to manage and combat emergencies and other forms of disasters than developing nations. For example, the way libraries in the United States of America responded to the Gulf hurricanes and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 really proved that libraries in partnership with relevant emergency support agencies can provide support to the public in course of health emergencies and disasters. During Katrina crisis, Louisiana libraries took up the challenge of providing the public with shelter, phone charging stations and internet connectivity (Veil and Bishop, 2014). Librarians at Louisiana libraries at that period of Katrina flood crisis, organized children's programmes, distributed food and water and also provided succor and emotional support to the Katrina evacuees. Libraries and librarians in developing countries should emulate this kind of gesture to help hordes of people being displaced from their homes due to one form of terrorist attack or the other (eg. Boko Haram attacks in some areas of North East Nigeria and some parts of West Africa, Fulani herdsmen attack in virtually all the states of Nigeria etc).

Librarians are endowed with professional information provision skills (Wanda et al., 2017). In emergency or disaster situations, librarians provide evacuees with information-literacy-related tasks,

ranging from completing FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) assistance forms and job applications, creating email accounts necessary for applying for assistance, and using database to search for friends and families (Albanese et al., 2005). Librarians also provide information for emergency or disaster responders, such as medical professionals and professional fire fighters. In 2010 in the United States of America, FEMA recognized public libraries as essential disaster response organizations. Every library is being urged to respond to health emergency situations or disasters by offering one form of help or the other to the affected victims.

#### **Perception of rural dwellers about library information dissemination on health emergencies**

Public libraries and other libraries are considered as a place of refuge for vulnerable people in our communities, including mentally retarded, vagrants (homeless people), and people experiencing some forms of trauma (Shubik-Richards and Dowdall, 2012. Wiegand, 2015 and Luo and Park, 2013). In a study conducted in Canada by Harris and Wathen (2007) where a group of women were interviewed to know their perception on public libraries viz-a-viz dissemination of public health information/health emergency information, more than half of the interviewees were of the opinion that they would consider using public libraries for support in dealing with health related issues. Some of the women in that study viewed the public library as a potential source for health-related issues because it provides access to the Internet, trustworthy print materials, support and advice from librarians.

Public libraries have always been the first point of access for people seeking consumer health information (Derring and Harris, 1996). Gale's Health Reference Centre and EBSCO's Health Source Plus are among the health databases that most public libraries provide to their clientele who seek for health emergency information and other related health information. These databases are furnished with current full-text sources of health information meant for library users who seek for health emergency information.

### **Role of libraries in the promotion of health emergency information**

Several authors have looked at the role of libraries including public libraries with respect to dissemination of health emergency information. Libraries and librarians have always engaged in patient education and in providing health information (emergency health information) written for the general public, often in partnership with other organizations and health institutions (Smith, 2011). Over the years, some public libraries and librarians have engaged in programmes to advance general literacy in children and adults by using easy-to-read health information materials. By such means, children and adults tend to become aware of emergency health situations in and around their communities.

Provision of health information services to the public is one of the ways that public libraries can impact positively on people's lives. According to Noh (2013), there are avalanche of health information resources on the Internet. It is very important for public libraries and other libraries to

harness such health information for ease of access to teeming population of library users. Malachowski (2011) asserted that public librarians are playing a significant role in teaching people about easily accessible, quality health-related websites to assist them with useful health information in situations of health emergencies. By such development, people in most communities now take their health issues more serious and the resultant effect is improved healthy lifestyle. In other words, public libraries are known to provide quality health information services that will always empower their users in situations of health emergencies.

In Holland, many public libraries are known to have set up health emergency information points or sections. At each of these points or sections, all important information materials on health emergencies and other related health issues are assembled together for easy access by library users. These libraries have trained reference librarians who are ever willing to help the public with their health emergency inquiries (Hindal, 2004). According to Chobot (2010), in a study on consumer health services in public libraries, 94% of the 270 consumers surveyed were found to acquire new health information via public libraries. Similarly, in another study, 56 percent of the respondents avail themselves of health emergency information from library books (Gavgani et al., 2013).

Provision of health information/health emergency information services has been identified as one of the possible functions of public libraries (Harris et al., 2005). A notable example is the Toronto public libraries in Canada. These libraries offer a consumer health information service that consists of

a reference collection of print and electronic resources as well as a referral service to other health agencies and organizations such as WHO, IRCS, USAID etc.

In Nigeria and other developing countries, the bulk of the studies are focused on the dissemination of health information on HIV/AIDS by stakeholders, including public libraries. Poor access to health information on HIV/AIDS in our communities has continued to fuel the stigma and discrimination encountered in individuals infected with this disease (Obidike and Igbokwe, 2019). According to these authors, both urban and community libraries can be of immense help in dissemination of health information on HIV/AIDS, so as to reduce the social stigma that is associated with the disease. In a related study, Kanyengo (2009) opined that libraries should play a significant role in the campaign against HIV/AIDS by partnering with relevant bodies and agencies to influence the production, distribution, and access to relevant health materials on HIV/AIDS. Libraries in developing nations face many challenges or obstacles in provision of health information on HIV/AIDS such as inadequate financial resources, lack of library skills and non availability of information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. Libraries should strive to augment or improve their ICT facilities by partnering with other institutions in order to make the required impact at the community level in the provision of adequate health information (Kanyengo, 2009; Muswazi, 2000). In Europe, two-third (66 percent) of health information seekers prefer online sources (Higgins et al., 2011).

To combat health emergency crisis, public libraries and other libraries should ensure that there is proper dissemination of health information to community members. Henry and Marley, 2004; Linnan



et al., 2004 were of the view that public libraries provide health information services to the general public. These libraries are advised to develop and widen their horizon by partnering with local health agencies and organizations to provide the desired health information services to community members. By partnering with other institutions, these libraries will not only increase the amount of quality health information made available to the public but also ease access to health information and enhancement of technological expertise. In this way, the availability of consumer health information to all community members is assured. Again, libraries partnering with other institutions can be in form of support training of library staff, acquisition of valuable equipment and tools as well as joint project activities (Henry and Marley, 2004; Kanyengo, 2009).

### **Strategies for positioning libraries as valuable tools in Promotion of Health Information for Addressing Health Emergencies**

1. **Professional skill Acquisition by librarians:** Libraries are known to provide wide range of information in their communities (Jaeger et al., 2007). The daily routine of a librarian in any community library demands professional skill for better customer service and information search, especially in this era of information and communication technology (ICT). Librarians in community libraries render library services to many library users. In situations of health emergencies in communities, affected individuals consult their community libraries for help. For example, in situations of hurricanes and flood disasters, evacuees are taken to near by community libraries where librarians help them by providing them access to Internet services as well as other

important services such as aiding these evacuees to locate their families and friends (Jaeger et al., 2006).

2. **Training librarians to gather and distribute health emergency information and other related information faster to the general public:** Community people see the library as the hub (most important place) of community health information and other valuable information in situation of any health emergency. As a result of this, librarians working in community libraries and public libraries strive to gather and distribute health information to members of the community in situations of health emergencies and disasters.
3. **Use of community libraries as comfort homes for victims of health emergency:** Community people can patronize community libraries and avail themselves the opportunity of visiting these libraries in course of health emergencies. They see the community library as a safe, welcoming place for people that desire some help in situations of health emergencies and disasters. Injured victims of flood and storm disasters in communities seek shelter in near by community libraries where librarians help them to reach the appropriate health agencies for health emergency treatment and advice.
4. **Community libraries working with agencies that control disease outbreaks e.g. NCDC (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control):** In this period of COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging the world, community libraries in Nigeria liaise with NCDC in educating the public on general

information about the virus, the on-going research and investigation on the virus and what the general public could do to limit the spread of the virus. In Kano State, Nigeria, some libraries were used as makeshift isolation centres for Covid-19 patients. In 2009, when the “swine flu” hit the United States of America, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in conjunction with Centre for Disease Control (CDC) developed a small widget (a computer device used to access information) and distributed the device to organizations and libraries to enable people access the necessary health information concerning the swine flu health emergency (Lisi Zach, 2011).

5. **Provision of printed newsletters/information pamphlets in health emergency situations and disasters:** Community and public libraries are in a position to provide newsletters and information pamphlets to the general public in situations of health emergency. Librarians cannot do this alone but in partnership with the appropriate health agencies. Such health emergency newsletter or information pamphlets could be circulated to the general public every two months or every quarterly.

### **General Recommendations**

1. Libraries should embrace the necessary ICT tools as well as various forms of social media that will help in the provision of quality and reliable health information in course of health emergencies and disaster crisis.

2. Again, for the rural dwellers to make appropriate health decision in health emergencies, they should have access to health care information from the libraries.
3. Trained librarians are encouraged to work hand in hand with the appropriate health agencies to educate the public on the causative or etiologic agents of some common diseases, necessary preventive measures and precautions to take in health emergencies and other forms of health crisis and natural disasters.
4. Librarians should endeavour to provide health information to the rural dwellers that may not have access to such desired health information in conditions of health emergencies. This is what is described as provision of health information outreach to rural communities.

## **Conclusion**

Provision and availability of health information is a component part of health emergency and disaster management. Communities should be equipped, prepared and ready to manage and combat health emergencies and disasters which often occur without signs. Libraries are seen to be in a better position to serve their local communities in combating health emergency crisis and disasters. To achieve this objective, the libraries are meant to partner with the appropriate health agencies at both the state and federal levels.

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