

Chapter 26

Media Awareness Preferences for Information on Sickle Cell Disorder Among University Students in Southwestern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Sickle cell disorder (SCD) is a defective blood disorder that causes pain associated with blood genotypes of victims who risk dying before their 30th birthday. SCD is best controlled when victims avoid getting married to one another to prevent the spread of susceptible genotype. Many youths lack basic facts of SCD. For long, its awareness was limited to broadcast and print media. But today, social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp—are also used to create awareness on the disease. This study attempts to determine the preferred communication channels for creating awareness on SCD among university students in South-Western Nigeria. Survey research design was adopted. Respondents were 259 students of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, and University of Ibadan, both in South-West Nigeria. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. Social media awareness was 51.6%, and conventional media was 48.4%. Thus, more of the respondents preferred awareness on SCD through social media platforms.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of mass communication for information dissemination is chiefly concerned with how the message persuades or otherwise affects the behaviour, attitude, opinion, or emotions of the person or group of persons receiving the information. Thus, specialists in the public health sector rely to a large extent on the traditional channels of mass communication (the radio and television, the newspapers and magazines) and lately, the internet (social media) to sensitise, mobilise, inform and educate the generality of citizens on health matters. In addition, they also make use of posters, banners, hand bills, and video programmes to educate and inform patients in hospitals and health centres with a view to creating awareness on public health issues.

According to Witte and Allen (2000), the traditional media and in this respect (radio, television, newspapers and magazines) “are intensively employed in health communication. Huge sums of money are spent annually on materials and salaries that have gone into the production and distribution of booklets, pamphlets, exhibits, newspaper articles, and radio and television programmes”. These media are employed at all levels of public health in the hope that three effects might occur: the learning of correct health information and knowledge, the changing of attitudes and values and the establishment of new health behaviours. The traditional media campaigns have long been a tool for promoting public health (Noar, 2006); being widely used to expose high proportions of large populations to messages through routine use of the television, radio, and newspapers and magazines. Communication campaigns involving diverse topics and target audiences have been conducted for decades (Wakefield, Loken & Hornik, 2010). Such campaigns are frequently competing with factors such as pervasive product marketing, powerful social norms, and behaviours driven by addiction or habit. Furthermore, traditional media campaigns are generally aimed primarily to introduce new knowledge and create awareness. However, there has not normally been a high expectation that such campaigns on their own would change people’s behaviour (Wakefield et al., 2010). Many factors are involved before human behavioural changes can be attained to improve the health of the people.

There are indications that social media is now a powerful source of health information in today’s society. Although there is a great deal of interest in using social media as a tool for public health communication, the research evaluating its utility is still in its infancy. There is an abundance of both formal and informal health conversations related to public health issues and organised health-related activities on leading social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp and Facebook. The quality of health information available to users on these platforms is highly variable, raising some concerns that social media users are exposed to unopposed viewpoints that counter core public health recommendations and contemporary medical science, such as those opposing immunisation and promoting smoking (Okoye, 2011; Nwosu, 2012; Obukoadata & Abuah, 2014). One of these many health related issues is sickle cell disorder (SCD), a deadly phenomenon which often defies medication but can be controlled through prevention. One of the most striking facts about sickle cell disorder is lack of public awareness and interest in the disease. The magnitude of the problem is apparent when sickle cell disorder is compared to other diseases that have had greater public interests.

Although found among all racial groups, individuals of African descent have the highest prevalence (Serjeant 2013; World Health Organization, 2008). People with Sickle Cell Disorder (SCD) have abnormal haemoglobin (Hb), called haemoglobin S or sickle haemoglobin, in their red blood cells. Haemoglobin is a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen throughout the body. The sickle cell trait (SCT) confers a survival advantage relative to individuals with normal Hb in a malaria endemic region where the

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