

Chapter 10

New Media and Health Communication: Communication Strategies in Malaria Control in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Malaria is endemic in the tropics and is responsible for a very high infant mortality, killing more than 3,000 children in Africa daily. The Nigerian government's control measures are targeted at nursing mothers and children. However, a significant portion of the population—the youth—are also very vulnerable. The new media are gradually gaining ground as a dependable channel of meeting the communication needs of young Nigerians. This chapter discusses how the potential associated with the Internet and social networks can be incorporated in the campaign for the Insecticide Treated Nets (ITNs) by Nigerian youth. It also proffers solutions and recommendations based on the concept of participatory development communications.

INTRODUCTION

Malaria is endemic in Nigeria (97%) and is responsible for one out of every five childhood deaths (United Nation Population Division: 2002).

Nigeria also ranks first among the thirty-five countries that are responsible for 98% of the total malaria deaths world-wide and contributes 96% to the total number of malaria cases (Roll Back Malaria: 2008). Malaria is responsible for the morbidity and mortality from illnesses such as respiratory infections, diarrhea, iron-deficiency

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diseases, anemia and malnutrition (Opiyo *et al*: 2007). Onwujekwe *et al* (2005) stated that malaria is the number one public health problem in Nigeria.

Malaria control is now a major global development priority and is critical in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. It is undeniable that malaria imposes a huge economic burden on the nation's health development. Ukwoma and Muanya (2009), summarises the cost implication of the endemic disease to individual and government thus:

Cost to individual and their families include: purchase of drugs for treating malaria at home; expense for travel to and treatment at dispensaries and clinics; lost days at work; absence from school; expenses for preventive measures; expenses for burial in case of deaths. Cost to government include: maintenance of health facilities; purchase of drugs and supplies; public health interventions against malaria, such as insecticide spraying or distribution of treated bed nets; lost days of work with resulting loss of income; and lost opportunities for joint economic ventures and tourism.

BACKGROUND

Current malaria elimination strategies rely more on individuals and communities to protect and treat themselves. Such strategies will only succeed if there is effective communication and genuine understanding around the causes, symptoms and means of preventing and treating malaria to protect the most vulnerable people. A current challenge facing Nigeria is how to achieve widespread distribution and use of insecticide-treated nets (ITNs) for the control of malaria (Onwujekwe *et al*: 2005).

The Abuja Declaration of 2000 reaffirmed international commitment to roll back malaria and called upon member states in Africa to undertake

health system reforms, including promoting community participation in joint ownership and control of the Roll Back Malaria alliance (RBM). The Abuja goals include ensuring that 60% of those with malaria have access to treatment within 24 hours of the onset of symptoms, at least 60% of at-risk pregnant women receive preventive drugs and at least 60% of at-risk groups sleep under bed nets (African Summit on Roll Back Malaria: 2005).

Vertical malaria control programmes of the 1970s focused on indoor residual spraying, uniformly applied across continents. Shifting from 'eradication' to 'control', today's approaches are more horizontal, with malaria control integrated into the primary health care system and relying on the participation of local people. The National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP) has developed a strategic plan which aims to halve the burden of malaria by 2010 and 75% by 2015. Nigeria's former Health Minister, Professor Babatunde Osotimehin explains that NMCP planned to have "at least 80% of households with two or more Insecticide Treated Net (ITN) by 2010 and sustained at this level until 2013."

COMMUNICATION AND MALARIA CONTROL

The principles of participatory development communication have great potential to be applied to the malaria control strategy. Development communication is a specialist field that has emerged around the mid-1960s with the emphasis on using news reporting for constructive and developmental ends. According to Folarin (1998), its focus is on long-term development. It is characterised by people's rights to information and to a voice, freedom of all communication channels, participation, ownership of knowledge, accountability of governments and societies, and people's improved ability to put informed choices into practice (Dunn: 2005).

Communication needs to be included in the process of malaria control right from the start, not

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