

## **Public Health and Health Promotion in Nigeria**

**By**

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### ***Abstract***

*Health is a fundamental human right and occupies a central point in our lives. It is so important that everyone is concerned and society must create and maintain the conditions under which members of the community can be healthy. Public Health attempts to achieve this through modern Public Health practices of preventing diseases, prolonging life and promoting health. Health promotion is the art and science of helping people discover the synergies between their core passions and optimal health, enhancing their motivation to strive for optimal health, and supporting them in changing their lifestyle to move towards a state of optimal health. Optimal health is a balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual health. Lifestyle change can be facilitated through a combination of learning experiences that enhance awareness, increase motivation and build skills and most important, through the creation of opportunities that open access to environments that make positive health practices the easiest choice. All these can be achieved through health promotion strategies like improved nutrition, exercise, management of stress and living a healthy lifestyle.*

**Keywords:** Health promotion, health information, Right Choice, optimal health, life style change.

## **Introduction**

Health is a very precious commodity in any society; hence the saying that health is wealth and it is seen as the foundation of all happiness (Adefolaju, 2011). The World Health Organization's (WHO) - International Conference on Primary Health Care in Alma-Ata (1978) declared that health is a fundamental human right and as such the greatest of natural resources of a nation upon which the happiness and powers of the people depend. Previously, the WHO defined health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being of an individual and not the mere absence of disease or infirmity. It is the fitness of the body and mind that empowers an individual to achieve a personal satisfying and socially useful life.

Health occupies a central point in our lives and is so important that everyone is concerned with its delivery systems and process. This concern for the health of individuals has brought an increased focus of the International Community on the importance of maintaining or improving one's health status through the practice of health enhancing activities in the society (Inyang and Ugwulor, 2015).

Society must create and maintain the conditions under which members of the community can be healthy. The responsibility for maintaining and improving the public's health lies with all the sectors of the society. Society's efforts have been carried out through a combination of the personal health care (sometimes called "medical care") and Public Health care systems. Through the activities of both private and governmental health care providers, organizations, and institutions, the primary health care delivery system provides primarily curative services such as treating illnesses and injuries to individuals with relatively little attention to prevention. Public Health interventions on the other hand focus on the health needs of the entire population. Primary health care providers have

little incentives, technical knowhow and equipment to consider population-based services. Primary health care helps treat injuries, alleviate disorders, and treat many diseases, but it is Public Health programs that prevent the outbreak and spread of diseases and diminish the likelihood of injury (APHA, 1995). Example of example common Public Health measures include promotion of hand washing especially during the recent outbreak of Ebola disease, exclusive breastfeeding, house to house delivery of vaccinations and distribution of condoms to control the spread of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), amongst others.

Modern Public Health practices requires the synergizing of multidisciplinary Public Health workers and professionals including physician's specializing in Public Health/community medicine/infectious diseases, psychologists, epidemiologists, biostatisticians, medical assistants, Public Health nurses, midwives, pharmacists, dentists, dieticians, nutritionist, amongst others. The activities within the Public Health and primary health care systems must be integrated and coordinated. Public Health tasks are carried out primarily by Government Health and Environmental Protection Agencies at Local, State and National levels. Some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and private individuals perform Public Health activities in collaboration with or at the request of government agencies (APHA, 1995).

The health of the citizen must be protected (by promoting it) because the world we live in faces serious health related problems. These problems includes ravaging Ebola outbreak in West Africa; environmental crisis such as climate change and deforestation, human suffering, particularly the prevalence of chronic and lifestyle-related illnesses; the breakdown of the family bond and values and the general lawlessness in our society. In order to overcome these problems, now is the time to reconsider and change the way we live, bearing in mind that one of the most fundamental ways to address the crisis is to tackle and prevent health problems before they develop. In this way, the control and responsibility for health are

becoming an integrative part of everyday life of the individuals, schools, with the support of the home, the community, and the government (Inyang & Ugwulor, 2015).

### **Public Health**

Public Health is the art and science of preventing diseases, prolonging lives and promoting health through the organized efforts of society (Acheson, 1988). In the same vein, the Centre for Disease Control Foundation (CDC, 2017) sees Public Health as being concerned with prevention of threats to health, based on population health analysis. The population in question can be small as a handful of people, or as large as all the inhabitants of several continents (for instance, in the case of a pandemic). Public Health promotes and protects the health of people and the communities where they live, learn, work and play. While a doctor treats people who are sick, practitioners in Public Health try to prevent people from getting sick or injured. They also promote wellness by encouraging healthy behaviours. Public Health sets safety standards to protect workers and develop school nutrition programs to ensure kids have access to healthy food (APHA, 2017),

Public Health is considered to be about the health of people or communities, as opposed to individual health. It is everyone's responsibility. The concept of Public Health is not unique and has changed over the years due to changes in the health status of the population and the determining situations of health. This definition of Public Health is directly linked to the wider definition of Health by the WHO (1948), where Health is referred to as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease." This means that Public Health aims to create the right conditions in order to provide this state of health for the benefit of society (Gascon-Perez, 2013). Public Health measures may not generally be considered 'health care' in the strictest sense. For example, mandating the use of seat belts in cars can save countless lives and contribute to the health of a population, but

typically money spent enforcing this rule would not count as money spent on health care (World Health Report, 2006).

### **Health promotion**

Health promotion is the art and science of helping people discover the synergies between their core passions and optimal health, enhancing their motivation to strive for optimal health, and supporting them in changing their lifestyle to move towards a state of optimal health. Optimal health is a dynamic balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual health. Lifestyle change can be facilitated through a combination of learning experiences that enhance awareness, increase motivation, and build skills and, most important, through the creation of opportunities that open access to environments that make positive health practices the easiest choice (O'Donnell, 2009).

According to Hubley and Copeman (2013) health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. To reach a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. Health is therefore seen as a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living.

Lambo (2006) also sees health promotion as the process of enabling people increase control over their health and its determinants and thereby improve their health. It is a core function of Public Health and contributes to the work of tackling communicable and non-communicable diseases and other threats to health. Health promotion is a continuous process of enabling people and institutions to increase control over their health. (Shehu et al, 2013).

Health promotion goes beyond health care, it puts health on the agenda of policy makers in all sectors and all levels. It directs policy makers to be aware of the health consequences of their decisions and accept their responsibilities for health (Hubley and Copeman, 2013).

### **Public Health and health promotion programs**

Health promotion as a Public Health concept first came into existence in the twentieth century following a long period of time when Public Health was viewed mostly as a field of sanitary legislations and reforms. The first international conference on health promotion by the WHO was held in Ottawa - Canada in 1986 (Hamza, 2014). At the conference in Canada also known as the Ottawa Charter, focus was on five key strategic actions which include; building healthy public policy, creating supportive environments, strengthening community actions, developing personal skills and reorienting health service (Inyang & Ugwulor, 2015). Another international conference was held in Thailand in 2005 and it ended with the resolve to reduce health care inequality by globalizing health care (Hamza, 2014). The Bangkok Charter, adopted in August, 2005 by WHO, emphasized the challenges facing health due to globalization, such as new pattern of consumption, urbanization, environmental degradation and commercialization led by multiple uncontrolled channels of communication, marketing unhealthy products and behaviour. Such challenges have resulted in constantly evolving patterns of health and demographic transitions (Inyang and Ugwulor, 2015).

In the 1970's, workplace health promotion programmes started to emerge as an adjunct to occupational health and safety initiatives. Workers were encouraged to participate in programmes designed to encourage physical activities, healthy eating, and smoke-free living. The health of the employee is very paramount to an organization as it determines the level of functionality of the employee and his ability to go about his duties. Also it tells how far the organization can go because it relies on the people at work. (Oke and Asamu, 2013).

Workplace Health Promotions are employers sponsored organized programs and comprised various services, activities and resources to support employees in practicing healthy behaviours to reduce health risks improve well-being, and manage chronic diseases. The European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP) in the Luxembourg

Declaration has defined Workplace Health Promotion (WHP) as the combined efforts of employers, employees and society to improve the health and well being of people at work (ENWHP, 1997). The workplace as a setting for health promotion deserves special attention, because adults spend more time at the workplace than in any other location to succeed and attain its set goals (Oke and Asamu, 2013).

### **Components of Health Promotions**

Health education is one of the components of health promotion and the other two are service improvement and advocacy. Health education service is the focal point for health promotion programmes. The reason for this is that the principles and methods of health education are being frequently used in all other aspects of health promotion (Adegbenro, 2013).

Health Education can be defined as any combination of learning opportunities designed to facilitate voluntary adaptation of behaviour which will improve or maintain health. It can also be defined as the process by which people acquire knowledge, attitude and behaviour which promote their health and aid them in making wise decisions to solve personal, family and community health problems (Adegbenro, 2013).

Service Improvement is one of the frameworks for promoting health and it involves improvement in quality and quantity of service through; ensuring that health care facilities are accessible, Improved leisure/exercise facilities, developing anti-smoking within primary care and availability of stop-smoking aids., ensure that cases brought to the health care facilities are well managed, ensure that health care providers and patients are well counseled, ensure that patients are well educated on health care needs and procedures and promote outreach and social marketing on health care needs (Hubley and Copeman, 2013).

**Advocacy:** This involves agenda setting and advocacy for healthy public policy through;

formulating policies for health, Income generation through payment for health services, removal of obstacles that prevent people from seeking and receiving health care services, abolishing all forms of discrimination such as race that hinders people from receiving health care as and when due and ensuring there are no form of inequalities in people receiving health care as all classes of people receive health care when needed Finally, ensuring there are no gender barriers in seeking and receiving health care, that is men and women should have equal opportunity (Hubley and Copeman, 2013).

### **Public Health and Health Promotion in Nigeria**

The National Health Policy and Strategy to achieve health for all Nigerians was promulgated in 1988. Prior to the promulgation of this policy in August 1987, the Federal Government launched the Primary Health Care programme in line with the Alma-Ata declaration (Ndie, 2014).

The National Health Policy constitutes a suitable framework for the design and successful implementation of a government led comprehensive health sector reform in Nigeria. It provide concise statements on ancillary policies of the main health programmes such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, Immunization Programmes, population, reproductive health, Health Management information system and Traditional medicine. Government is also aware that Health Promotion is a rapidly emerging approach to health development. There is growing evidence, which shows that health promotion makes a positive contribution to the improvement of human health. The emergence of the new dimensions of demographic trends, urbanization and changing lifestyles have associated risk factors with implication for health. While health education is central to health promotion, legal, fiscal, economic, environmental interventions are also essential (Lambo, 2006).

The Health Promotion policy contains guidelines to assist in creating positive outcome such as empowerment for health activities and increased



community involvement. The Policy also prescribes the institutional framework for the organization and co-ordination of the health promotion programmes nationally. Health promotion would enable individuals acquire information, knowledge, attitudes and skills as well as change attitudes and behaviours to facilitate the making of healthy choices (Lambo, 2006).

According to Lambo (2006), the National Health Policy identified the following actions by individuals, families, communities and governments as being essential for the promotion of health:

- Adoption of Lifestyle changes including diet, exercise and reduction of smoking and alcohol intake.
- Improved childcare practices including uptake of immunization, exclusive breast feeding, complementary feeding, uptake of child health service and meeting the needs of physically challenged children.
- Adoption of measures to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and promote reproductive health through measures such as family planning, improved antenatal care, prevention of female genital mutilation, safer sex behaviours, and utilization of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) service.
- Appropriate use of health service in the early stage of disease when they are still treatable e.g. malaria, TB and Leprosy.
- Adherence to treatment prescribed by health worker and support for actions to control the sale of counterfeit drugs.
- Participation in screening programmes for diseases such as hypertension and cancers.
- Adoption of appropriate behaviours and safety measures to reduce injuries at work, home and on the roads.
- Participation in national health programmes such as Onchocerciasis control.
- Strengthening of network in families and communities to provide support and care to their members, maximize their potentials to

participate in health development, promote mental health and enhance social capital, and

- Support for government introduction of improved health laws and public safety measures for reduction in injuries, food hygiene measure, housing, water supply, sanitation and other environmental measures.

Implementation of these measures require effective and sustained programmes of health promotion focused on healthy behaviours in communities, improvement in the quality of health services and addressing social and economic determinants of health problems including poverty, consumer rights, food security, environmental measures such as water supply and sanitation, education, gender rights etc (Lambo, 2006).

Health promotion involves the individual and the community in decision making about their health. It also takes into consideration the decision making process by policy makers because the more people value their health, the more willing they will be to make the appropriate allocation of resources to promote and safeguard their health (Hamza, 2014).

### **Traditional Public Health practices and health promotion**

In the early part of human origin, primitive societies developed certain amount of series of group and community hygiene usually derived from experience with survival. The primitive cultures of the world recognized the existence of diseases and engaged in forms of voodoo or tribal dancing, temporary banishment, and subjecting to smoke and noise to drive away the evil spirits of the disease (Oladepo and Sridhar, 1987).

Among the classical cultures, archeological evidence and other records show that Minoans (1600-1400 BC) and Mycenaean's (1600-1200 BC) built drainage systems, water closets and water flushing systems. Herodotus wrote that Egyptians of 1000BC were the healthiest of all civilized nations because of their sense of personal cleanliness and practices of hygiene (Oladepo and Sridhar 1987). The Hebrews extended Egyptian hygienic

thoughts and formulated in Leviticus about 1500BC which is probably the world first written hygiene code. It dealt with a wide variety of personal and community responsibilities which include, cleanliness of the body, protection against the spread of contagious disease, isolation of lepers, disinfection of dwellings after illness, sanitation of camp sites, disposal of excreta and refuse, protection of water and food and the hygiene of the maternity (Oladapo and Sridhar, 1987).

Traditional Public Health practices had existed in Nigeria prior to the era of colonialism which serves the health needs of the people because the people believe good health is regarded as the state of total effective physiological and psychological functioning, and all human societies' desires good health for their members (Adefolaju, 2011). The rigid traditional concept of health based entirely on diseases or the absence of it has done little to reduce the burden to diseases particularly in Third World Countries (Hanza, 2014). Cultural practices of people not only affect their health, but also affect all aspects of life including social relationships, contribution to societal functioning and disease conditions (Ojua et al, 2013). The methods of health care developed by the indigenous people arose from interactions with their peculiar environments and belief system. It is therefore anchored on the realization that only the healthy can perform his/her obligation towards the survival and development of the society. Furthermore, health embraces all the goods and services available for the promotion of health, including preventive, curative and palliative interactions (Adefolaju, 2011).

According to Ojua et al (2013) some positive practices that promote health in Nigeria are;

It is common for mothers to breastfeed their children for a long time especially amongst the Ibibio and Efik people. Breastfeeding for six months to one year also acts as family planning to the mother, also placing women on special diet after delivery helps them to regain lost nutrients during pregnancy and delivery. According to these authors, sexual abstinence during lactation is also widely practised because of the belief

that a woman is not fully pure at this time. This helps in child-spacing and family planning. Furthermore, among the Igbos of South-East, the Benins of Edo State, the Ijaws in South-South Nigeria, and several other ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria, it is a common practice for people to embark on wrestling combat when it is not farming season, this promotes physical and healthy activities. Environmental Sanitation is practice virtually in every Nigerian society. Early morning sweeping of the house and compound by both men and women is encouraged to promote health. Traditional medicine has developed the world over in response to the health needs of the people and it involves the development of various traditional systems of using locally available resources for the alleviation of their health crisis (Adefolaju, 2011).

### **Health promotion strategies**

To attain a state of complete physical, mental and social well being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize their aspirations, to satisfy their needs, and to change or cope with the environment. Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities. Therefore, health promotion is not just the responsibility of the health sector but goes beyond healthy life-styles to well-being (WHO, 1978).

Health promotion is a proactive approach to healthcare that stresses prevention of diseases along the health care continuum. Health promotion strategies focus on keeping people well and preventing disease from occurring, in other words, they are primary prevention activities. Health promotion is the process of empowering people to make healthy lifestyles choices and motivating them to become better self-managers (Centre for Health Promotion, 2006).

Inyang and Ugwulor (2015) stated four strategies that can promote the health of individuals; these are nutrition, exercise, stress management and other healthy life styles.

**Nutrition:** is all about the food people eat and how the body uses it. WHO (2014) defines nutrition as the science of food, the nutrients and other substances therein, their action, interaction and balance in relation to health and disease, and the processes by which the organism ingests, absorbs, transports, utilizes and excretes food substances. To prevent certain diseases and to promote good health, it is important that individuals should eat in moderation and avoid unhealthy food items and patterns. It is a healthy eating habit for people to be conscious of what they eat.

Many costly and disabling conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases are linked with common preventable risk factors. Unhealthy nutrition, tobacco use, physical inactivity and excessive alcohol use are major causes and risk factors for these conditions. Age is also an important factor that is considered in the choice of feeding and quantity of food taken.

The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in 2010 collaborated with experts from Universities, Ministries and Non-governmental Agencies and summarized strategies that are most likely to be effective in promoting healthy eating. Eating a variety of foods, balancing the food one eat with physical activities, maintaining and improving weight, choosing a diet low in fat, and cholesterol and choosing of a diet moderate in sugar, salt and sodium, including more fruits, vegetable, bread, cereal, dry beans and peas in the meal.

**Exercise:** One of the basic ingredients for promotion of optimum health is engaging in moderate exercises. Physical exercise is any bodily activity that enhances or maintains physical fitness and overall health and wellness.

According to the US Department of Health and Human Service (2006) exercise can be classified into aerobic and anaerobic exercise. Aerobic exercise is any physical activity that involves the use of large muscle groups and causes the body to use more oxygen than it would while

resting. Examples includes cycling, swimming, brisk walking, skipping rope, roaring, hiking, playing tennis etc.

Anaerobic exercise on the other hand is called strength moves or resistance training. Example of strength moves are pushup, lungs, and bicep curls using dumbbells, weight training, sprinting etc. others are Isometric exercise which involves little application of mild force (push or pull) against immovable objects for about 5 to 8 seconds. It is useful in preventing muscle atrophy.

Relaxation exercises, to intensify exercise as well as breath-control exercise like Yoga and activities such as stretching which help to improve joint flexibility and keep muscles limber, the goal is to improve the range of motion which can reduce the chance of injury.

However, some activities are designed to correct alterations in the body's anatomy or physiology, example of this is the therapeutic exercise. Exercise is an important component of health promotion. Anything that gets you mildly out of breath and a little sweaty is fine. For example heavy gardening, swimming and cycling. A brisk walk each day is what many people do and that is fine. Exercising thirty minutes a day for five days in a weeks is all that is required, to obtain some of these health and wellness benefits.

**Management of stress:** Stress is a continuous feeling of worry about work or personal life that prevents an individual from relaxing (sociological definition) Stress is one of the health threatening factors that emanates from lifestyles. It is the biological response to events that threaten to overwhelm the individuals' capacity to cope satisfactorily with the environment. Stress is inevitable in human life because of too many human activities and the insatiability of human wants.

According to Onuzulike (2006) certain lifestyle features could lead to stress. These include; too much work with little balance. Those who devoted all their time to work and work related activities and put other areas of their lives - like relationship, hobbies, and exercise on hold put

themselves at high risk for burnout. Having someone to talk to about what stresses us, someone to play with when one has the free time, and someone to show understanding when times are tough are all important and necessary aspect of social support.

**Healthy life styles:** Lifestyle is defined as a sum total of individuals ways of life, individual lifestyle constitute what he/she eats, drinks, smokes, physical activity or inactivity, participation in unprotected sexual behavior and drug habit. The indices above are called lifestyle factors, which are responsible for degenerative and chronic diseases that afflict human beings in recent times such as hypertension, diabetes, cancer, stroke and liver diseases including the spread of HIV/AIDS. Lifestyles are patterns of behavioural choice made from the alternative that are available to people according to their socio-economic circumstance and to the ease with which they are able to choose certain ones over others. Lifestyles are the “behaviour of choice” which affect one’s fitness and health status (Shehu et al, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Chronic illnesses, as well as injuries, mental illness, oral health and substance abuse represent a considerable burden both on the quality of life of individuals and also the cost of treatment for the health services. The causes of ill health can be prevented or alleviated by appropriate action as well as improving people’s life expectancy and quality of life, there is also an argument that ‘prevention is cheaper than cure’ and well designed health promoting interventions may save health care costs. The government, NGOs and other stakeholders should expedite actions, programmes and activities that will enhance the health status of the citizens in order to proactively prevent communicable and non-communicable diseases and improve the health of the people.

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