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Promoting Public Awareness of HIV/AIDS in Africa: Follow-Up to a Pilot Study

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Introduction

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has been among the most serious natural disasters in recent centuries. Adeyi, et al. (2006) remark that, "in the worst affected regions, notably Sub-Saharan Africa, this steadily progressing catastrophe threatens to become a calamity of cataclysmic proportions." The author conducted a pilot study between 1990-1996 on public awareness of HIV/AIDS through two newspapers that were widely read in Nigeria (Komolafe 1999). The study revealed that with increase in frequency of reports, newspapers could be used as one of the many tools to educate the Nigerian populace.

In the past ten years after the pilot study, several million people worldwide have been infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), the causative agent of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Keating, et al. (2006) observe that, "HIV/AIDS is a serious concern in Nigeria today because the estimated annual deaths as a result of the disease have increased from 50,000 in 1999 to over 350,000 in 2004."

According to Chikonzo (2005), Sub-Saharan Africa is the region of the world most affected by HIV/AIDS. An estimated 25.4 million people are living with the disease and approximately 3.1 million new infections occurred in 2004. By 2005, the epidemic had claimed the lives of an estimated 2.5 million people in the region, with more than 2 million children under the age of fifteen living with HIV and more than 12 million children orphaned by AIDS.

Komolafe (1999) reported the findings of Piot, Kapita, and Nguigi (1999) that about half the number of infected people die within 5-10 years and that HIV has become endemic in parts of Africa, while the estimated number of those affected ranges in the millions. The authors asserted that in many parts of Africa, HIV has become a major public health problem of the same magnitude as malaria, diarrhoea, and malnutrition.

The Nigerian HIV/AIDS situation is no better than in most African countries ravaged by the disease. The problem is compounded by the large population. In the pilot study, it was reported that out of the 20 million HIV cases in the world in December 1995, 11 million (35.5%) were from Sub-Saharan Africa, and 4.8 million (5.2%) Nigerians had tested positive for HIV (Komolafe 1999). As of January 1996, it was assumed that the reason for the staggering number of infected people was the lack of commitment from the Nigerian military leadership (Jimoh 2002). By 1999, when the military rule gave way for democratic rule in Nigeria, hopes were high for a better health care system, and a well-funded public health sector with positive impact on the scourge of HIV/AIDS through public education. By 2003, the virus had infected approximately 5% of the adult population; an estimated 4-6 million Nigerians were

carrying the virus. The National Intelligence Council (NIC) identified Nigeria amongst the five countries that could be worst hit by the epidemic. A projected 10-15 million Nigerians, especially youth, or about 25% of the adult population, would be affected by the virus without aggressive intervention.

There have not been many research studies done to evaluate the effectiveness of the print media in awareness campaign against HIV/AIDS, in Nigeria or globally. Tran et. al, looks in depth at newspapers reporting on HIV/AIDS in Vietnam, finding that newspaper reports pay little attention to People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWA) (3.9%) and that the highest percentage (49%) focus on HIV/AIDS programs. In Nigeria, Adesomoye (2002) corroborates Komolafe's (1999) findings that coverage of the disease is minimal with inadequacy in the coverage that does exist.

Isibor and Ajuwon (2004), in their study on journalists' knowledge of AIDS and attitude toward people living with HIV, found a number of misconceptions amongst journalists concerning the disease, while a high percentage of them (65%) had never written any report on HIV/AIDS-related issues. Jimoh (2002) is another Nigerian researcher with a similar study, who did content analysis of 2,156 articles and found that newspaper reports were often coverage of workshops and conferences and government policies and pronouncements. The study found appreciable progress, although during the period of military rule in Nigeria neither the press nor the government gave the epidemic the proper attention. Ghosh and Bhatt (2006) observe that, "HIV is too complex and too multifaceted for any stakeholder or constituency to deal with." Based on this premise, the researcher is introducing another dimension to the study; that is, the roles of libraries and librarians in creating awareness.

There are many illiterate people in Nigeria, but it is believed that "an informed person or group can educate their peers and community" (UNICEF). The pilot study was carried out to assess public awareness using the means available: the media. It was limited to the print media by studying two of Nigeria's popular newspapers: the *Daily Times of Nigeria* (DTN), and the *Nigerian Tribune* (NT). DTN is a national newspaper owned by the Federal Government. It presents and promotes government policies, with issues ranging from national to local. NT is a privately-owned and widely-read newspaper. This follow up study introduces a new dimension to validate the roles of health librarians, if any in the dissemination of public health/education information, to educate the populace on the HIV/AIDS scourge.

Objective

The objective of this follow- up study was to verify if:

- There had been an increase in frequency of reportage of HIV/AIDS in the Nigerian print media in 2000-2006 compared to the pilot study findings carried out in 1990-1996. Increase could mean more information than before.
- Librarians could complement the efforts of journalists, health professionals, governmental and non-governmental organizations in the dissemination of information on HIV/AIDS through provision of information sources and packaging.

Methodology

The pilot study was for a period of six years: 1990-1996; the follow-up covers another six years: 2000-2006. DTN and NT were selected for the study. These newspapers were searched for information on any aspects of HIV/AIDS: prevention, transmission, screening, treatment centers, government policies, non-governmental organizations, religious perspectives, socio-cultural attitudes, and reactions to HIV/AIDS-related issues.

Citations were recorded on 3" by 5" cards for the six years in question. Every month, daily records were collated and entered into a spreadsheet. These numbers were in turn added together to get the annual number of times any information on HIV/AIDS was carried by these two newspapers.

A second part of the study was a questionnaire for librarians. In Nigeria, the Oyo state chapter of the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) initiated the involvement of librarians in HIV/AIDS awareness campaign in July 2007. To create an enabling environment for the enlightenment, the E. Latunde Odeku Medical Library, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan, hosted the meeting. Participants were given information on the disease by health experts. At this the inaugural meeting, there were about 30 librarians present. Ten senior academic librarians were considered for the study. The senior librarians were selected because they could effect change more smoothly and influence younger colleague. In the second phase of the study, a six-question questionnaire was administered to the ten senior academic librarians. The questionnaires were collected and analyzed to get ideas about librarians' role in tackling the problem of HIV/AIDS.

Result Analysis

Comparative analysis of pilot study and follow-up study.

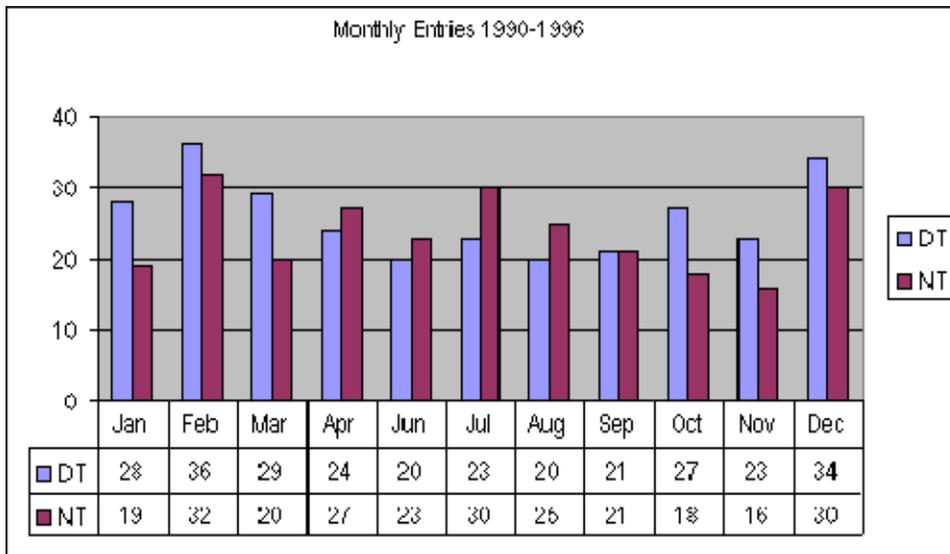


Fig.1

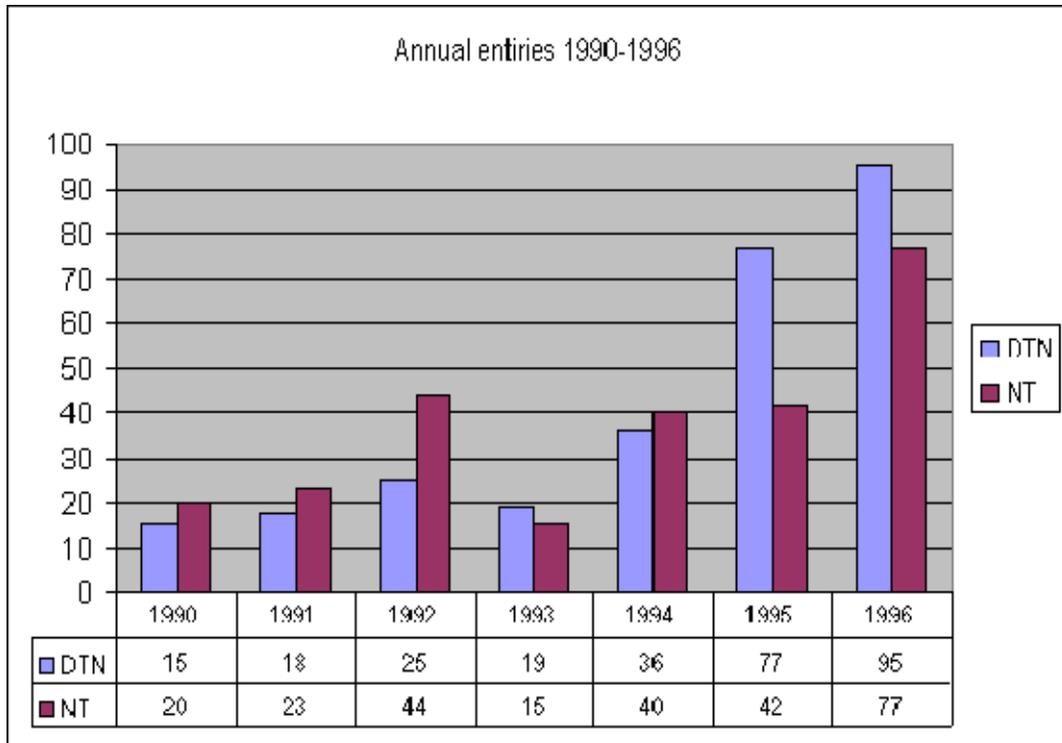


Fig.2

Between 1990 and 1996, the highest and lowest annual numbers of reports from DTN was 95 and 18 respectively. NT recorded a high of 77 and a low of 15.

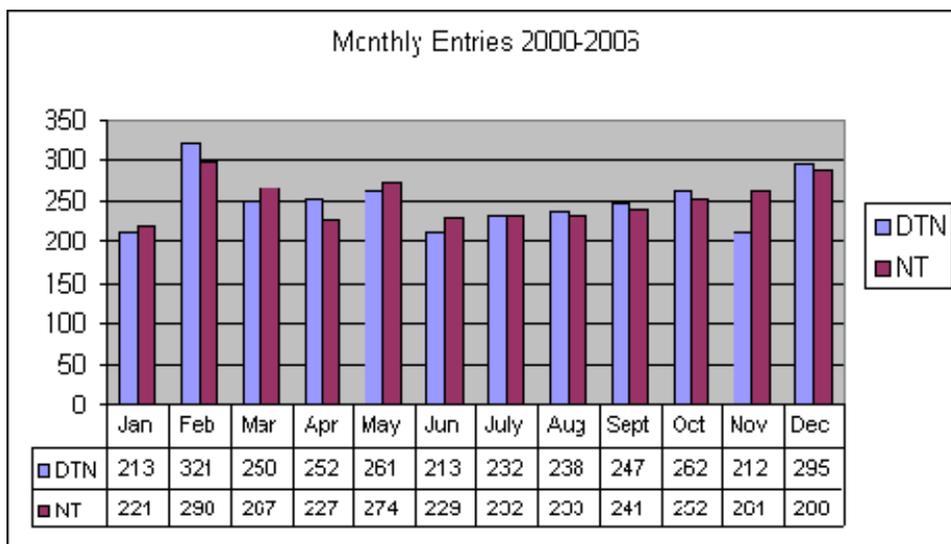


Fig3

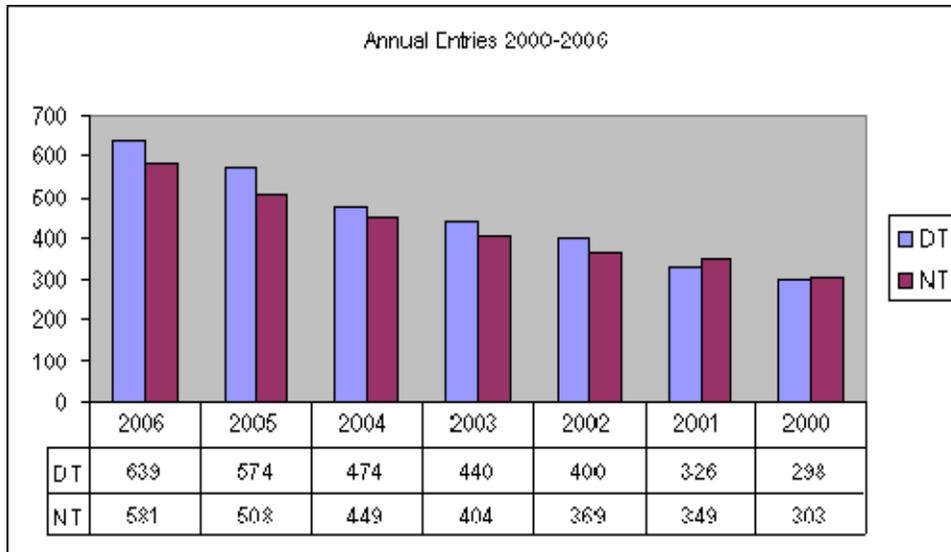


Fig.4

The follow-up study shows significant progress in the reporting of HIV/AIDS from 2000-2006, with DTN at a high of 633 and low 298. NT recorded a high of 581 and low of 303.

Results of the questionnaire administered to ten senior academic librarians:

- Asked if they do participate in any form of formal campaign against HIV/AIDS, one was formally contributing while the remaining nine said they had never participated in any formal the campaign against HIV/AIDS.
- Asked if there was need to make contributions toward the campaign, all agreed that it was time for librarians to begin making strong contributions.
- Asked why it took librarians and NLA so long to act, nine said they thought it was outside the scope of librarians' duty to dabble in health related issues. One librarian had been contributing through membership in a non-governmental organization working against the disease.
- To a question suggesting means of contributing to public education, all unanimously agreed that they could work with government and with non-governmental organizations in the provision of relevant information to educate the public.
- All suggested placement of easy-to-read HIV/AIDS information in strategic places in the library, such as doors, notice boards, and sides of the bookshelves as simple means of creating awareness to library patrons. Health or general knowledge information repackaging by librarians for local or professional dissemination was also suggested.
- All agreed that that the local chapter of NLA was moving in the right direction through leadership by example as regards the disease.

Discussion

The follow-up study showed a remarkable improvement in the frequency of reports on HIV/AIDS compared with the pilot study. There were inconsistencies in the frequency of reports, but in February and December frequencies were higher. One reason for this may be that February 14, (Valentine's Day), in Nigeria and probably globally, is tagged "lovers' day." Abati (2008) remarks that, "This event has now become such an annual cultural fare among young Nigerians, with some young-at-heart older persons participating in it; so popular is February 14 on the calendar, that indeed it will be no exaggeration to say that it competes with better known occasions such as Christmas and Eid-el-Kabir. There was so much excitement about the celebration of love." Right from the beginning of February, awareness campaigns increase. The high frequency of reports occurs again in December, which is also a festive period

characterized by lots social activities including Christmas. Frequent reports and campaign against HIV/AIDS during this period are targeted at youth or young adults. According to Carr (2004), librarians and other concerned groups are coming together on ways of defining common challenges and identifying potential strategies to improve the coordination and dissemination of accurate and current HIV/AIDS information.

Emerging Roles for Librarians

Ghosh and Bhatt (2006) studied the role of information professionals in combatting AIDS in India, and developed recommendations on the dissemination of HIV/ AIDS information:

- Librarians can be advocates and educators in AIDS information dissemination
- Librarians can collaborate with non-governmental organizations in packaging health information
- Librarians can help researchers publicize their research output to the local community
- Librarians can promote HIV/AIDS information that they have access to
- Collaboration between librarians and community health workers and outside agencies can mobilize and educate community members
- Notice boards and library circulation desk can be used to distribute notices and flyers
- Information can be repackaged for health workers
- Libraries can acquire special collections to keep people informed of new developments

Conclusion

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is complex and multifaceted. Groups and individuals must be ready to work together. The print media could do more in the awareness campaign against HIV/AIDS despite the fact there was a remarkable increase in the frequency of reports of HIV/AIDS between 2000-2006 compared to 1990-1996 in Nigeria. A high frequency of easy-to-read reports can create more sensitivity and awareness. Press journalists could work with health organizations for current information on the disease. Accurate press reports would help in immeasurable ways to correct myths about HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. Librarians can respond by finding relevant information and guiding users to resources (Baffour-Awuah 2004). This might necessitate constant reacquainting themselves with current developments in the treatment of HIV/AIDS as well as governmental policies dealing with the disease. Ghosh (2006) observes that, "Today's challenge to librarians is to reinvent the libraries to respond to community needs." Lynch (2008) remarks that, "As librarians, we owed much to the past, but more to the future" in fighting HIV/AIDS to eradication.

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