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Initial Reactions to the News about Ebola Virus in a Rural Community in Nigeria: Lessons Learned

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Abstract: The Ebola virus outbreak in 2014 and the messages that followed disorganized people and generated panic in rural communities in Nigeria. This paper presents the author's eyewitness report on the initial reactions of people to the outbreak of Ebola virus in a rural community in Enugu, State, Nigeria; the ways people experienced the news about the outbreak; and lessons learned about acquisition and dissemination of health information in rural communities. People claimed that they received what they considered to be a body preservation message from their church leaders- pastors, priests and others. The message was for people to 'drink and bathe with warm water treated with common table salt'. The news was widely spread in the community, probably because of a sense of obligation to protect relatives, friends, and well-wishers. Word of mouth was effective in disseminating messages related to Ebola in a rural community, people were obligated to help and protect one another in this rural community, church leaders can be used effectively in disseminating health information in rural areas, there is a need to train church leaders on how to handle disease outbreaks and provide them accurate information, and people were doing what they believed it would take to survive-they improved sanitation and personal hygiene practices and stopped participation in key cultural activities in efforts to avoid direct contact with other people.

Key Words: Ebola virus, rural community, Nigeria, eyewitness report, body preservation, church leaders, word of mouth, disseminating health information, disease outbreak, cultural activities, sanitation, personal hygiene practices.

Subject Areas: Global Health/Public Health

DESCRIPTION

During the beginning of second week in August 2014, one early morning, I was awakened by a family member who had received a text message followed by a call from her friend saying that people should bathe and drink warm water treated with salt for body preservation in order to protect them from the Ebola virus. The message was spreading like wild fire; within 10 minutes of my receiving the message, I was contacted by five well-wishers, back to back, one at a time, who wanted to make sure that I had heard the message and that my warm salty water was ready for bathing and drinking. In a matter of minutes two neighbors visited me to convey the same message and to charge their phones and make phone calls to their loved ones in order to pass on the message as well- 'bathing and drinking warm water treated with salt for body preservation and protection from Ebola Virus'. Before long my compound was like a conference venue, filled with people. People were clearly in panic mode and yet they were determined to protect others by conveying what they considered a crucial life-saving message- 'drinking and bathing with warm water treated with salt'. I was amazed by the speed at which the message was spreading. One thing that got my special attention was that the proportion of salt to water for drinking or bathing water was not indicated in the message, which gave me an opportunity to speak to whoever would listen. I told them that drinking and bathing with water treated with salt could lead to health problems in some people. Too much salt ingestion could disturb the fluid and electrolyte balance in the body and lead to high blood pressure and dehydration. A

body in dehydration mode would be more susceptible to infection, including infection by the Ebola virus if the person makes direct contact with an infected person. The panic, chatting and spreading of the news continued. The salty water body preservation and Ebola virus protection message caught the attention of many people in the rural communities. I accompanied a friend who was a medical doctor to the ministry of health in Enugu State. The commissioner of health was on his way to a meeting with church leaders. I asked him what the ministry of health was doing for the public. He responded that the ministry of health had been working with the World Health Organization (WHO) and health practitioners since the outbreak began and had been doing their very best to disseminate correct information to the public in order to protect them.

I was able to see public service announcements on the television (TV) to communicate information about Ebola virus to the public (what it is, how it is transmitted, the manifestations, and safety and prevention measures). However, such public service announcements were accessible only to the privileged few, those who owned television sets. Via word of mouth, messages related to infection prevention and control reached this rural area well about personal hygiene, keeping surroundings clean, avoiding bush meat, and avoiding direct contact with other people.

OTHERS' DESCRIPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES

When I came back to the United States, I asked people residing in rural Nigerian communities to describe their initial experiences with the news about the Ebola virus in Nigeria.

Here are some of their descriptions:

"It was terrible, people were scared. Some even drank salty water and bathed with hot salty water, claiming that church leaders directed them. Some died in the course of doing that while others got seriously sick from drinking and bathing with salty water. Some thought it was the end of the world, considering how contagious the virus is. Some people, who could afford it, resorted to using hand sanitizer until the panic subsided."

"People stopped buying and eating bush meat because it was announced to be the carrier of the Ebola Virus. People were afraid of contracting this deadly infectious disease and they are willing to do anything not to give it a chance. They became more careful in personal hygiene and in keeping their surroundings clean."

"People actually avoided close body contacts such as embracing and handshaking, which is the culture. People stopped attending any kind of ceremonies which included weddings, funerals, naming, association annual meetings and conventions. Even some Christians stopped receiving Holy Communion. People said that some hospitals rejected patients due to fear, which may have contributed to some deaths. As one lady put it -to crown it all, most people died in the course of running for their lives due to street panic/alarm."

"Most notable actions and reactions were the sporadically generated suggestions proclaiming Ebola cure with bitter kola, the use of warm water treated with salt for bathing and drinking, and the use of leaves cooked for bathing, the federal government containment measures included mass media information, use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, meticulous hand washing yielded great results."

"When the Ebola virus was detected in Nigeria, I was doing my youth service, serving my fatherland in Bomadi in Bomadi Local Government Area in Delta State. As a youth coper, I was enlightened with the ailments that are common with the terrain that I am going to spend one full year. Months into my youth service year, the federal government announced the discovery of the first Ebola victim in Lagos state, most of us were puzzled owing to the fact that the virus has only being reported to be found in Congo. According to reports, the victims and the virus has been quarantined. As an enlightened fellow, I was full of dread because the virus has no cure and as I know her is incapable of taking care of such and outbreak so I was convinced that the whole population is at risk if this outbreak spreads further."

"Typical to Nigeria superstitious beliefs and with the little enlightenment of the locales there was a preventive therapy that is salt solution (many were advised to bathe and drink salt solution and personally, I was coerced to do that by my

caring parents and in-laws). I questioned the efficacy of the salt solution to a virus that I understand sort of cancerous although I complied out of respect and not to be regarded as a stubborn person. All these happened before the proper enlightenment campaign was established. I and million other Nigerians were properly educated on the causes, symptoms, and preventive measures of Ebola. If memory serves me well, I was meant to understand that the Ebola virus is carried by animals such as monkeys, bats, and whole lot of bush animals and the virus can be transferred if a human being consumes the meat of any of these animals with the virus".

"The preventive measures were that a healthy individual should avoid fluidly contact with victims and washing of hands regularly with soap. The federal government advised people that public agencies, government parastatals, schools, banks, and public places should provide plastic buckets with taps, soaps and towels for individuals to use regularly. Personally, it was effective in dousing the tension that was rising amongst Nigerians. Thankfully to the Federal government, ministry of health and foreign aid partners, the outbreak of the deadly virus was successfully quarantined and curtailed. No further spread of the virus was officially reported apart from the initial victims of the first carrier that came to Lagos."

"Lesson learned from the whole drama can be classified into various categories and they are: Health education and enlightenment: As a youth coper, I was opportune to be amongst the people that aided in enlightening students, in the course of the training and enlightenment campaign. I was privileged to grasp the history of the virus and how it is contracted and steps taken to prevent it from being contracted. I also understood that is paramount for someone to wash his/her hands regularly. I also learned that it is essential to stay abreast of every medical condition because that will help understand them perfectly and either stay away from it or combat it."

"Deteriorating nature of our health facilities half-baked medical officers: Most of the facilities in our country are in dire need of upgrading and revival, when the Ebola drama was playing out some of the health facilities across the country were not ready to combat the virus and neither was medical officers because most of them were not abreast with certain safety measures because there were medical that exposed themselves to the deadly virus."

"Most of the medical facilities do not have the necessary facilities to quarantine anyone in case of any disease outbreak. Information is power: Information is paramount when dealing with anything, armed with adequate information, Nigeria was able to curb the spread of the deadly virus and successfully attain the feat of an Ebola – free country by the World Health Organization (WHO)."

Lesson Learned include the following:

- That church leaders can be used effectively to disseminate health information in rural communities; but they have to be equipped with the correct information.

- Word of mouth can be very powerful in spreading news in rural communities; people spread the news to anyone who would listen, which was practically everyone, about bathing with and drinking water treated with salt in order to prevent the dangerous Ebola virus.
- Culture of protecting others; people made sure that their neighbors, loved ones received the message-bathing in and drinking warm water treated with salt in order to protect them from them from the evil Ebola.
- Doing what it would take to survive; people started practicing good sanitary techniques and improved on their personal hygiene practices; even stopped participating in cultural activities in order to avoid direct personal contact with other people.
- Hopefully people would remember and practice what they learned in any future epidemics.
- Preparedness is the key to prevention of Ebola outbreak, which entails creating informed communities about proper home sanitation and self-hygiene, safe cultural burial practices, compliance with proper sanitation and safety procedures in hospitals/health centers, good disease surveillance, fast and accurate diagnosis, isolation and management.
- Amending the rudimentary causes of Ebola outbreak such as unsanitary cultural burial practices, poor sanitary condition, public knowledge deficit about Ebola would help prevent Ebola outbreaks in the future.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The experiences described in this paper focused on how people in rural communities in Nigeria reacted to Ebola virus outbreak and news. The panic was not really surprising because humans would react with panic when met with uncertainty, which was the case with the Ebola virus.

Drinking and bathing with warm water treated with table salt is not a part of precaution measures in Ebola virus prevention. Ingesting too much salt and applying too much in the skin can lead to adverse health outcome such as hypertension and dehydration respectively (Story, 2015)

Individuals can take certain steps to prevent them from contracting Ebola virus disease. Some precaution measures discussed by the Centers for Diseases Control and prevention (CDC) and Health line include:

- Proper and frequent hand washing or use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Individual awareness on recognizing the disease and how to prevent it
- Do not make direct contact with the blood and body fluids of any individual who is sick
- Do not touch the body of someone who died from Ebola especially in burial rituals
- Do not handle items handled by individual with Ebola such as clothing, beddings or others without appropriate protection
- Do not touch bats and nonhuman primates and their blood and body fluids; do not touch or eat raw meat prepared from the animals

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