

Health Literacy Programmes for Sustainable Development: The Role and Expectations of Library and Information Professionals

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Abstract

The paper explored the expected roles of library and information professionals in the implementation of health literacy programmes. The paper discussed the understanding of the concept of health literacy, the nexus between libraries and librarians in promoting health literacy; justification for health literacy in rural communities; Collaboration with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), school-to-school approach, deployment of technology to health literacy programmes, partnership with health workers, collaboration with traditional rulers/community leaders were articulated as strategies for sustainable health literacy programmes. Challenges to provision of health literacy programmes include language barrier, lack of requisite health literacy skills, diversity in health information needs among rural dwellers, lack of preparation among librarians and lack of knowledge of health information. Translation of health literacy programmes to local dialect, proper understanding of the health needs of rural dwellers and being equipped with the requisite health literacy skills were recommended. It was concluded that since health literacy has become more important to both the developed and developing nations of the world, it is imperative that library and information professionals take proactive measures to ensure that it is implemented fully to support sustainable development.

Keywords: Health Literacy, Information Professionals, Library Professionals, Sustainable Development Goals,

Introduction

The year 2020 remains a year to be remembered for the much dreaded Corona virus disease also known as Covid-19. The manner with which the global economy was shut down by the fear of COVID-19 pandemic underscores the reality that health is wealth. This points to the necessity of providing health information to meet health needs of the citizenry. No doubt, access to health information is key to living a healthy life as well as the overall well-being of the citizenry. This apparently proves that health information should be given urgent attention in contemporary society. However, the provision of health information unarguably will be ineffective if no machinery is put in place to ensure that a healthy society is achieved. One of such machinery is health literacy programmes. It is in view of the necessity of health skills in attaining healthy society that health literacy remains an essential instrument for ensuring that citizens stay safe and healthy irrespective of the prevailing health threats and situations overwhelming the entire globe.

Health literacy contributes to the individual or groups ability to make sound health decisions. One of the ways through which people can be empowered to access health information is through health literacy programmes. In other words, an essential ingredient in the effort to increase health equity and reduce health disparities is eliminating health literacy barriers (Logan *et al*, 2015). Health literacy is an important determinant of health, and is one of the key indicators of a healthy city (Liu *et al*, 2018). Health literacy is fundamental if people are to successfully manage their own health (Keleher and Hagger, 2007). Moreover, health skills are increasingly needed to function in society and low literacy may have effects on health and healthcare (Berkman, Davis and McCormack, 2010). Expectedly, there is a growing movement to increase awareness of the health literacy problem and decrease its harmful effects on the society (Orban, 2005).

Health situations are changing globally. For people to constantly stay healthy, it is important that they be adequately aware and informed of steps to take in a changing world. As a result, people are increasingly asked to be actively engaged in their own health care decision making process. Not only do people need information to make good decisions, they also must know how to understand and apply the decisions in their lives (Lukenbill and Immroth, 2009). Improving health literacy involves more than the transmission of health information, although that remains a fundamental task (Nutbeam, 2015). However, to improve health literacy, library and

information professionals can play significant roles in the dissemination of health-related information.

Health literacy is an important tool in empowering community towards improvement in their health status. Since libraries guarantee access to information, the recognition of their role in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development is worth noting (Dadzie, Martin-Yeboah and Tachie-Donkor, 2016). Libraries in the present age should be able to select, organize and store health related information resources that can be utilized to improve prevailing health challenges. Okunlola, Oluwaniyi and Oyedepo (2018) posit that librarians and indeed their libraries must take a proactive stance on the pertinent aspects of the sustainable development initiative by keeping the populace well informed about issues involving the United Nations, new order and developing a culture of information seeking in tandem with global realities.

Librarians must be accountable to the society for providing the needed data and information on the attainability of the sustainable developing goals. Okunlola, Oluwaniyi and Oyedapo (2018), recognizing the place of librarians in the actualization of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda state:

. . . all stakeholders of the post 2015/2030 agenda should take part in a regular process of reporting as well as in review and follow-up cycles conducted under the roof of a post-2015 accountability framework, especially by information providers. This is where the importance of librarians and information managers must be carefully observed as most aspects of the agenda is dependent on relevant data and timely information especially to the youths and people in remote places.

Nevertheless, any step towards improving people's access to literacy programmes or initiatives is key to actualizing healthy lives, especially within the context of the SDG. Liu *et al* (2018) citing a publication on Guidance on Strengthening Health Promotion and Education (2016) posit that improving people's health literacy is one of the most fundamental, economic, and effective measures to improve the health of the entire population. SDG 3 aspires to ensure good health and well being for all. It aims at addressing all the general health issues including, but not

limited to communicable diseases, sexual and reproductive health, degenerative or lifestyle disease, narcotic and substance abuse, health care system and infrastructure, health finance and strengthening the capacity of countries to act against the risk of trans-border disease. (Baptist, 2015 in Dadzie, Martin –Yeboah and Tachie- Donkor,2016). It is in line with this perspective that this paper seeks to explore the role and expectations of library and information professionals towards sustainable health literacy programmes and initiatives that will align with the goal number 3 of the much heralded sustainable development goals.

Objectives of the Paper

The paper generally focused on health literacy programmes for sustainable development with reference to the role and expectations of library and information professionals. The specific objectives of the discourse are, to:

- i. Present a conceptual analysis of the term health literacy;
- ii. Discuss the justification for health literacy in contemporary societies;
- iii. Examine the nexus between libraries and promotion of health literacy;
- iv. Outline the role and expectations of library and information professionals;
- v. Discuss the strategies for sustainable health literacy; and
- vi. Explain the challenges to provision of health literacy;

Health Literacy: Conceptual Review

Reaching a consensus on a definition of health literacy is complicated by the multiple skill categories and applications that are increasingly identified as necessary to be “literate” in relation to one’s health. Health literacy is a term often heard in medical settings. It is used to reference a variety of issues and it has a specific and multifaceted definition (Francis, 2008). Conceptualizations (and definitions) of health literacy will continue to evolve in response to rapid advancement in science and technology, as well as changes in delivery of health care and public services, coupled with increasing expectations and responsibility on individuals and groups to be able to understand and act on the information (Berkman, Davis and McCormack, 2010). Health literacy is not simply a technical matter involving reading and numeracy skills (Keleher and Hagger, 2007).

Health literacy comprises not only an individual's ability to gain access to, understand and use health information, but also health care providers' ability to make health information accessible and usable. Beger (2017) defines health literacy as "the personal, cognitive and social skills which determine the ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information to promote and maintain good health. Berkman, Daris and McCormack (2016) define HL as the degree to which individuals can obtain, process, understand, and communicate about health-related information needed to make informed health decisions. Furthermore, health literacy can be understood as one of the essential determinants of whether individuals can use healthcare to achieve good health; "Good health" is what individuals expect will be the result of healthcare (Vernon, *et al*). Gilstand (2014) citing Van Dijk (2005) and Simonds (1974) sees health literacy as concerning acquisition, evaluation and appropriate application of relevant health information for communicating about health, making health decisions and health. It was noted that health literacy involves knowledge and skills on three levels; *functional health literacy*, which is reading, writing and basic knowledge of the body necessary to understand simple health advice, integrative or communicative; and *health literacy* which are communicative skills that help maintain own health in interaction with professional health care workers. According to Nutbeam (2015), health literacy can be seen as the possession of literacy skills (reading and writing) and the ability to perform knowledge-based literacy tasks (understanding and using information) that are required to make health related decisions in a variety of environments (home, community health clinic).

Health literacy is regarded as an important pre-requisite in order to take up a proactive role with respect to one's health and lifestyle, and to be able to perform as an active partner in encounters with healthcare professionals and institutions (Rademakers & Heijmans, 2018). This to them, is relevant for people with one or more chronic conditions, who have more frequent interactions with healthcare professionals and who are supposed to be active in the self-management of their disease.

As rightly noted by Parragh, Okrent and Mehryar (2015), knowing how to find a doctor, fill a prescription, how to use and pay for that medication and understanding the medical provider's explanations are all measures of health literacy. A core component of health literacy is the capacity to access, obtain, understand and act on health information. It is presented in many ways and is increasingly complex. It includes written information - including online information, medication

instructions, prescription, consent forms, signage, and interpersonal communications (Victorian Government, 2013). Malik, Zaidi and Hussain (2017) citing

Evangelista *et al* (2010) pointed to the fact that “a person is said to be health literate if he/she is able to understand complex vocabulary, can easily share personal information with health care providers, is able to take decisions for spending a healthy lifestyle, can actively participate in self-care and chronic disease management and is capable enough to navigate a complex health care system.

It is not surprising that Eriksson-Backa *et al* (2012), looking at the concept of “health literacy” within the perspective of health sciences and health communication define it as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. In which case health literacy can be seen as the ability to obtain, process and comprehend fully the fundamental health related information and services required to make timely health decisions.

Nexus between Libraries, Librarians and Promotion of Health Literacy Libraries provide print and non-print information resources for utilization by its teeming consumers. Information resources in both print and non-print remain the platform upon which health literacy could be executed and implemented. The role of the librarian in providing health information to the layperson has expanded in recent years. Libraries can advance health information literacy in their communities by leading collaborations and starting dialogues among community organizations with common interests in addressing important local health issues (Bond, Friel & Lahoz, 2011). As put forward by Muzava and Katabalwa (2017), libraries have been noted to support community development in various areas such as education, economic, research and health. More so, experiences show that libraries act as a bridge of information from information providers such as government, organizations and institutions to the people. Orban (2005:2) states that:

Extending health information services to the layperson involves unique challenges that all librarians must recognize and address if they are to effectively meet the diverse information needs of today’s health consumer. Because consumers may rely on the health information they obtain from libraries to make important decisions regarding their

personal well-being, it is imperative that the librarians responsible for selecting and disseminating consumer health information are mindful of the far reaching implications of their services.

There is a strong nexus between librarians, libraries and promotion of health literacy.

Outlined below are the various areas that explain the nexus

- Proper utilization of health information in public libraries by community members is likely to reduce mortality rate and generate healthy citizens that are eager to ensure community development (Egunjobi and Akerele, 2014);
- Libraries have the role of collecting vital, quality and relevant health information resources for combating diseases (Mnzawa and Katabalwa, 2017);
- Libraries have long been seen as a connector between the public and health information, whether it is a public, hospital or an academic health science literacy;
- However, beyond just collecting and organizing of health-related information and documents, librarians should be ready and willing to teach members of the public how to go about their health information needs.
- Librarians could not successfully serve as a connector without librarians. More so, not just librarians but skilled librarians. Library and information professionals must be adequately skilled to be able to sustain the efficacy of health literacy programmes.

Justification for Health Literacy in Rural Communities

The rate at which health information, and other misinformation on the internet has filled the internet space increased the need for skills in finding and evaluating information. Mnzawa and Katabalwa (2017) see health illiteracy as a challenge among the people especially in rural communities. Many people for instance are not aware of the causes of many disease including non-communicable diseases, despite the effort made by available libraries and NGOs. More efforts are still needed to increase health literacy promotions especially in rural communities.

Health literacy is to every individual in the society. This is because a health literate person understands his/her health status, and will likely take prevention and control measures against

various diseases (Mnzava and Katabalwa, 2017). Health education can also raise awareness of the social determinants of health, and be directed toward the promotion of actions which may lead to modification of these determinants (Nutbeam, 2017). Health literacy is the capacity to make sound health decisions in the context of everyday life-at home, in the community, at the work place, in the health care system, and in case of emergency (Ghosh, 2013). Good health and well being are central to human development (Dadzie, Martin- Yeboah and Tachie-Donkor, 2016). Zarcadoclas (2011) as cited in Malik, Zaidi and Hussain (2017) sees low health literacy as a “silent killer” that can be tackled by closing the gaps between health messages and health messengers by using simplified language and including cultural appropriateness. They posit that poor understanding of health related information and ignorance leads to poor management of health among less educated population leading to early deaths.

Health literacy is intrinsically linked to both an individual and a community’s socioeconomic context, and is a powerful mediator of the social determinants of health (Logan *et al*, 2015). According to Gosh (2013), it is the presumption that the very act of providing people with health information leads to a better health outcome and prevents disease; as awareness could improve dialogue between patients and health care professionals, which might then lead on to better treatment. In developing countries, people continue to die from various health related complications, due to lack of health care information. Moreso, in today’s world, deadly AIDS and other communicable and as well as deadly diseases like Corona Virus (COVID) 19 indicate the need to redefine the role of libraries and information professionals in improving health information literacy to combat the pandemic. This further aligns with the submission of Amaechi, Benson, Dike & Okere (2016) that librarians should wake up and make their impact felt in the global move of making the universe a better place.

Strategies for Sustainable Health Literacy Programmes

Library and information professionals can adopt several strategies to ensure that health literacy programmes are actualized and remain sustainable. Below are some of the strategies that can be adopted:

a. Collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders:

There are several non-governmental organizations that are passionate about the healthcare of the

citizenry. Library and information professionals can liaise with NGOs to promote health literacy. The need for librarians to exchange expertise with other librarians, collaborate with health care professionals and other health agencies has become imperative. Library and information science professionals are expected to collaborate with non-governmental agencies to promote sustainable health literacy. Chew (2018) affirmed that collaboration between public libraries and health sciences libraries helps to promote awareness of health literacy, provide health information materials that are easy-to-read, accessible in many languages and culturally appropriate, and by developing approaches and materials to teach consumers how to find and evaluate health information.

b. School to school approach: Library and information professionals can decide to adopt the school-to-school approach of promoting health literacy. This would help in catching them young. According to Hagell, Rigby and Perrow (2015), a health promoting school can promote health literacy among young people, and can empower them to take action that goes beyond the school walls. Here, library and information professionals can partner with heads of schools and proprietors to achieve this.

c. Change in approach: Lukeenbill and Immroth (2009) posit that librarians will need help in reassessing their professional responsibilities and should learn the art of being more forceful in advocating for better health information resources

d. Deployment of technology to the health literacy initiative: Library and information professionals can utilize and maximize the platforms presented alongside with technological development and computer systems to attempt to exchange and develop information among people in the community. For instance, with the help of the Internet, social media sites, like Whatsapp, facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat, have made it possible for individual and private organizations to create and distribute content to large groups of people at little or no cost. According to Sasidharan and Janodian (2018), technology has not only improved speed of communication but also has provided many platforms through which communication happens. They noted further that the success stories of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp blog sites are examples of how different modes and platforms are used by people to communicate using digital technology and social media. However, despite the numerous benefits associated with integration of social media, they are not without challenges. For instance, it is well known that

information on social media is not always trustworthy as it is readily accessible and can be modified. Mnzar and Katabalwa (2017) recommend that librarians should tap the available opportunities such as ICTs tools and social media which are increasingly becoming common in the daily lives of the people.

e. Partnership with health workers: partnership is becoming integral to the sustainable development of the society. Obidike and Nkechi (2011) as cited in Mnzawa and Katabalwa (2017) maintained that libraries should partner with community health workers which include medical doctors, veterinary doctors, and other health personnel in order to gain access to vital health information issues for health development and disease awareness. Library and information science practitioners can contribute towards the provision of health information services through sustainable partnership with health workers (Ekere, Eze, Benson & Ebobo, 2019). Similarly, Ekere, Benson and Amaechi (2016), Benson (2016) and Benson, Anyalebechi and Amaechi (2015) all emphasized the place of partnership in disseminating information to the society.

f. Understanding of the concept of “health literacy”: proper and accurate understanding of the concept of “health literacy” will facilitate full delivery of sustainable health literacy in the context of SDG. Understanding “health literacy” in the context of health disciplines can help librarians to effectively communicate and collaborate with health care professionals. Orban (2005) opined that poor health literacy may actually be preventing many individuals from comprehending and acting on the information they receive. Therefore, ensuring that health information is understandable and usable is a fundamental component of effective health information programs and services (Lukenbill and Immroth, 2009). It is expected that health practitioners need to improve the clarity of their written and spoken health information.

g. Collaboration with traditional rulers and community heads: Library and information professionals can collaborate with traditional rulers and community leaders in ensuring that health literacy programmes are provided at the grassroots level or rural communities.

h. Provision of adequate funding: According to Mnzawa and Katabalwa (2017), fund is always needed to support training programme, and preparation of promotional materials including brochures, leaflets, training materials and others resources, especially those found on the internet (p.25).

Challenges to Provision of Health Literacy Programmes

There are several constraints to the provision of health literacy programmes within the context of developing countries. These constraints include:

- i. **Language barrier:** language barrier may affect the provision of health literacy in a multi-lingual society and rural areas in developing countries. Adams *et al* (2009) as cited in Malik, Izaidi and Hussain (2017) noted that one of the barriers faced by people having low health literacy level around the world is due to misunderstanding of health information in English language.
- ii. **Non- existence of social media policy (SMP) on use of social media in health literacy programmes:** There is need for social media policy to guide the integration of social media platforms to the provision of health literacy programmes.
- iii. **Lack of literacy skills:** This challenge is two-way. Lack of health literacy skills on the part of the people and health care providers or other stakeholders limit the extent to which provision and utilization of health literacy can be achieved.
- iv. **Diversity of health needs:** providing health literacy would be more effective when such initiatives are tailored toward specific needs of the populace. According to Orban (2005), one of the most challenging aspects of the health literacy problems for both librarians and physicians is knowing how to identify someone with poor health literacy.
- v. **Lack of preparation among librarians:** most librarians are not adequately prepared for the provision of health literacy. According to Luo and Ta Park (2016), public librarians are not necessarily well prepared for providing consumer health information services
- vi. **Lack of knowledge of health information:** Lack of staff training and knowledge of health information is a major problem in providing health information, as well as lack of financial resources in communities to support libraries as health information centers.

Conclusion

The global world is in dire need of health information in view of the various diseases that have besieged the world. Considering the necessity of health in consolidating wealth of nations, health literacy has become more relevant and imperative to both the developed and developing nations

of the world. In such a time as this, library and information professionals have special roles to play in promoting health literacy programmes. Librarians in the medical sector should wake up to the reality of health information needs of contemporary society, especially in this era of infodemic. The continuous outbreak of different diseases plaguing the world simultaneously places an urgent demand for health literacy.

Recommendations

The following are recommended:

a. *Translation of health literacy programmes to local dialect:* Library and information science practitioners can engage translators that will help in translating and repackaging health related information to rural dwellers. This no doubt will solve the problem associated with language barrier. The information can be replayed during local community meetings. Through this, a good number of people can be reached. More so, radio programmes on health literacy can be initiated and anchored in local dialects, to reach a larger audience.

b. *Proper understanding of the health needs of rural dwellers:* Library and information professionals can only carry out effective and sustainable health literacy programmes when the health needs of the rural dweller are taken into consideration.

c. *Library and information professionals should be properly equipped with health literacy skills:* It is imperative that librarians improve their knowledge of health-related matters and knowledge-base of health information. Through this, they will be better positioned to carry out and implement effective health literacy programmes in rural areas.

d. *Formulation of social media policy:* It is pertinent for librarians to articulate and come up with social media policy. The policy will help in ensuring that the right thing is done at the right time. The social media policy will determine the content that should be disseminated in the chosen social media platforms.

e. *Strong partnership initiatives:* Library and information services providers must form a strong synergy towards the provision of health literacy programmes. This will solve the problem

of inadequate knowledge of medical concepts. Librarians can partner with health workers and media practitioners for the health literacy programmes to be properly implemented.

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