

Pulmonary tuberculosis: public awareness of a killer disease in Nigeria

Pulmonary tuberculosis has caused the death of millions of people in Nigeria. Currently, tuberculosis (TB) in Nigeria is a major public health challenge and a priority disease in the nation's health plan, along with HIV/AIDS. Nigeria is ranked fifth among the 22 nations of the world with high TB burden. A lack of knowledge of the disease among the general population has led to its high incidence and prevalence, according to the Health Minister.

There has been a re-emergence of TB in Nigeria in the last 10 years, probably due to poor knowledge, poor socio-economic conditions, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The people mostly affected are in the 15 to 44 age group. They suffer social exclusion and stigma, due to the commonly held belief that the disease is due to a spiritual attack or witchcraft. This results in patients seeking help from traditional healers instead of Western medicine.

In the 2008 global TB control plan, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that Nigeria had nearly 449 600 new cases in 2006 – with 44% of the new cases being sputum-smear positive, an annual incidence of 311 cases per 100 000 population and a mortality rate of 11% in 2006 (see <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/nigeria/487468/pdfs/JanuaryTuberculosisFactSheet.pdf>). The TB burden is compounded by high HIV prevalence, multiple drug resistance, and inadequate TB control programmes. TB cannot be contained within the national boundaries due to the recent surge of immigration and thus has become a global issue.

Nigeria declared TB a national emergency, inaugurated the national TB/HIV working group in 2006, and adopted the directly observed therapy short course (DOTS) policy in 1993. Despite these policies, there are still major issues and TB awareness is still very poor. Therefore, raising public awareness about TB in Nigeria is essential in maintaining effective control and eradication of the disease. This approach is central in improving strategies aimed at increasing access to treatment, encouraging people to seek medical help, and improving people's knowledge of the disease.

Strategies for awareness

Existing policies have failed to make any significant difference in improving the awareness of people about TB, and there are no adequate awareness programmes on how to control and prevent the disease. However, there are strategies that have been recommended to meet the challenges faced in Nigeria and the federal government should adopt them to ensure 100% disease eradication and knowledge improvement.

There is need for effective use of print and electronic media by the government and private organisations, emphasising what TB is all about, and there must be open debates on radio and TV to correct myths and misconceptions. Health talks, producing leaflet information, the use of internet sources for information (such as

Facebook), and posters in public places are important to increase awareness and eventually eradicate TB; exhibitions and conferences should also be organised. This approach is vital both at local and national levels and will not only improve knowledge but will bring a shift in people's behaviour and lifestyle in a more positive way, leading to treatment adherence, and an understanding of disease transmission, control, and prevention. The government should introduce TB education into the school curriculum in both secondary and tertiary institutions and adult literacy education programmes. The philanthropic agencies and organisations should emulate initiatives in other countries such as the UK and India to establish a TB Alert Charity and TB Action Group to promote awareness programmes of TB, support sufferers, and lobby for improvement of existing treatment and support. People will learn that by simple changes in behaviour, such as covering the mouth when coughing or sneezing in public and living in well-ventilated and non-crowded homes, they are more likely to reduce the spread of TB and promote wellbeing.

Role of TB nurse specialists and patient-centred care

The focus should be more on establishing specialist nurses in the communities, especially in the rural areas to maintain a close link with the community leaders and sufferers. The nurse specialists can use those cured of the disease as outreach partners, especially in rural areas, and encourage them to speak in centres including schools and communities about the experience of sufferers. This will help to address stigma, promote preventive measures, pass on the message that TB is treatable, and establish appropriate mechanisms of follow-up. This policy will help nurses to manage the TB centres in the communities to aid early screening and diagnosis, and promote TB education.

Integrated TB/HIV services

There is a high mortality rate from TB/HIV co-infection. Therefore, it is important for the federal government to adopt a new policy to attract individuals to come for voluntary screening and free treatment. Since the majority of sufferers are poor and unemployed, the Nigerian government should create TB/HIV income support or benefit schemes, free accommodation, and free medical check-ups and jobs. A community-based approach, including weekly home visits and health education campaigns, will help integrate sufferers and healthy people.

The Nigerian government should create guidance by awareness programmes. There should be measures to protect the public from TB in the form of notification of cases and contact tracing. Looking forward to the 2015 target year for the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and beyond to year 2050, for complete elimination of TB as a global public health issue, public health awareness is paramount.

Columbus Ife, BSc Nursing, MSc Public Health is working as a public health specialist in London, UK