Promoting Public Access to Health information: Experience of the Association for Health Information and Library in Africa, AHILA-Tanzania Chapter

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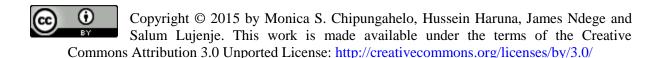
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Abstract:

Health is an essential aspect for development. People with poor health and malnourished in the community fail to work hard and hence slow down the development of a nation. Promoting and improving public access to nutrition and health related information is a most important activity in people's livelihood in the community.

The purpose of this article is to discuss initiatives of the project that was conducted by Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA)–Tanzania Chapter in promoting and improving public access to health information. The project activities started June 2013 and ended September 2013. The project was executed by Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre library in collaboration with Association for Health Information and Libraries–Tanzania Chapter (AHILA TZ Chapter) and Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW). The article also discusses the achievement, challenges and lessons learned from the project

Keywords: Health information, Health promotion, Health libraries, Health Information and Libraries Association, Tanzania

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Introduction

Health is an essential aspect for development. People with poor health and malnourished in the community fail to work hard and hence slow down the development of a nation. Access to relevant health information is crucial to the economic, political, and social well-being of any community. People in the community would like to access relevant and reliable information about transmission, prevention and treatment of diseases.

Recognizing the importance of having healthy people in the communities, relevant health information must be organized, communicated, and preserved for current and future access and use by the public. Public Access to Health Information (PAHI) is of vital importance to African countries, especially in Tanzania, where societies are faced with health problems (Godbolt & Stanley, 2010). There are considerable health challenges facing our population in Tanzania including maternal and neonatal mortality, malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and non-communicable diseases (Kwesigabo et al, 2012).

Health challenges can be better addressed if credible information about transmission, prevention and treatment are readily available. The need for improved access to evidence-based health information has been recognized by public health practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and librarians.

Health information, of variable quality, comes from a variety of sources including health professionals, media, family, social networks, religious leaders, educators, and the internet. It has been reported by different scholars that some sources of health information sometimes might be irrelevant and unreliable (Eakin et al., 1980; Godbolt et al., 2010). These reasons make it difficult for people to make informed health decisions for themselves or those they care for, hence resulting to poor health status in the community (Godbolt & Stanley, 2010).

The development of reliable, relevant, usable information can be recognized as an important plan that requires cooperation among a wide range of professionals including health-care providers, policy makers, researchers, publishers and information professionals.

Libraries can partner with community health workers to gain access on vital health information issues, on avoiding the circumstances that cause health problems, and on providing preventative health programs and treatment programs (Obidike, 2011). Health librarians or health information officers can also play an important role, as their purpose is to promote and enhance access to health information. Such groups can provide needed assistance through training and through the selection, repackaging, and dissemination of relevant materials (Eakin et al., 1980; Colomb &Godbolt; Gathoni 2012; Marwa, Meshack & Godbolt, 2014).

Despite the progress made to disseminate health and nutrition related information through mass media, newspapers, exhibitions and information communication materials, Tanzania communities continue to face significant health challenges and nutritional diseases. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (Tanzania) and ICF Macro (2011) documented important indicators that illustrate the health challenges facing women and children in Tanzania including;

- maternal mortality ratio: 454 per 100 000 live births
- neonatal mortality: 26 per 1000 live births
- infant mortality: 51 per 1000 live births
- under-5 mortality: 81 per 1000 live births.

The Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre (2014) reports that 13.4 per cent of children under 5 years are underweight and that 34.7 percent are stunted in their growth.

The key issues here to be addressed are that there is a great need to raise awareness and to improve public access to nutrition and health related information in health facilities and training institutions in Tanzania. The purpose of this article is to discuss initiatives of the project that was conducted by Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa–Tanzania Chapter in promoting and improving public access to health information.

The general goal of the project was to promote and improve public access to nutrition and health related information. The specific goals of the project were:

1. to improve knowledge and skills of health information professionals in promoting and improving public access to nutrition and health related information;

2 .to increase awareness and use of nutrition and health related information; and

3. to train health librarians and health care providers on promoting public access to health and nutrition related information.

The Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa–Tanzania Chapter

The Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA) is a professional association founded in 1984 with 46 member countries, partners and collaborators worldwide including Tanzania.

AHILA was founded with the aims of improving provision of up-to-date and relevant health information; encouraging professional development of health librarians; promoting information resource sharing and exchange experiences, as well as promoting the development and standardization of exchange of health databases in Africa.

 AHILA-Tanzania Chapter (AHILA–TZ) is a non-government organization (NGO) registered in 2003 whose objective is to promote relationship and networking among health librarians and information professionals within the libraries and information centers in health settings. The AHILA-Tanzania Chapter has carried out a number of activities such as preparing a brochure and recruiting members. In addition, the chapter has developed a "yahoo groups" for easy communication and resource sharing between Tanzania-AHILA members. Through using the mailing list ahilatz@yahoogroups.com, the librarians have been able to exchange and network in health information service (http://ahila-tz.org/about-ahila-tz-chapter.html).

Project Implementation Plan

The project was conducted in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; it started June 2013 and ended September 2013. Four health information professionals were involved in the implementation of the project, coming from the following institutions: Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre,

Tanzania Food and Drug Authority, Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, and Africa Medical and Research Foundation. Fifteen participants were selected to attend one day training.

The project was executed by Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre (TFNC) library in collaboration with Association for Health Information Libraries in Africa-Tanzania Chapter (AHILA-TZ), and Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW). TFNC and MoHSW libraries worked closely with AHILA-TZ Chapter to identify health information professionals who were involved in promoting and providing public access to nutrition and health related information. Ministry of Health and Social Welfare identified appropriate health information from their departments, health facilities and health training institutions for the purpose of promoting public access in health centers.

Initiatives of the Project

The following activities were the initiatives of the project:

i. Identify health libraries: The project members conducted the task of identifying health library and types of health information offered. The Librarian from Ministry of Health and Social Welfare collaborated with AHILA–TZ Chapter to identify health libraries available in Dar Es Salaam. A total of 25 health libraries were identified (for details, see Table 1 below).

Table 1: List of Health Libraries Identified

s/no	Name of a Library
1	Africa Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF)-Tanzania
2	National Aids Control Programme (NACP)
3	Tanzania Commission for AIDS (TACAIDS)
4	Ocean Road Cancer Institute (ORCI)
5	Tanzania Food and Drug Authority (TFDA)
6	Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre(TFNC)
7	Ministry of Health and Social Welfare
8	Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Science
9	Government Chemist Laboratory Agency
10	World Health Organization – Tanzania
11	National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR)
12	Lugalo Allied Health Training Institution
13	Lugalo School of Nursing Training Institution
14	Agakhan University
15	Muhimbili School of Nursing Training Institution
16	International Medical Technology University
17	A3 School of Nursing Institution
18	Mikocheni School of Nursing Training Institution
19	Royal Pharmacy Training Institution
20	Mount Ukombozi Allied Health Training Institution
21	Massana School of Nursing
22	Gataraye Research and Training Centre
23	Paradigm Pharmacy Allied Training Institution
24	St. Peter's College of Health Science
25	Herbert Kariuki Memorial University

ii. Identify types of health information available in the health libraries: The project team members identified types of information available in health libraries through visiting the library and asking types of information available in the libraries. The project members also used institutional website to browse library pages and resource center pages to search out the kind of information available in the libraries

iii. Developing and designing of the promotional materials: The project members designed a brochure entitled "Know the Health Libraries". The brochure was developed for the intention of informing health libraries and categories of health information which available in the libraries. The brochure also aims at promoting health personnel and general public to visit health libraries in order to access and use better and reliable health information.

   a. Distribution of promotional materials: 55 print promotional materials were distributed to 14 health libraries these including National Aids Control Programme, National Institute for Medical Research, Tanzania Food and Drug Authority, Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre, Ocean Road Cancer Institute, Government Chemist Laboratory Agency, The Agakhan University, Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences, Lugalo Military Medical School, Tanzania Commission for AIDS, Africa Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF)-Tanzania and World Health Organization-Tanzania

iv. Organizing a training workshop: The project members selected health librarians who attended and participated in a one day training workshop of promoting and improving public access to health information. The fifteen librarians were selected from the following institutions, colleges, universities and health centers. These including National Aids Control Programme, National Institute for Medical Research, Tanzania Food and Drug Authority, Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre, Ocean Road Cancer Institute, Government Chemist Laboratory Agency, The Agakhan University, Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences, Lugalo Military Medical School, Tanzania Commission for Aids, Africa Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF)-Tanzania, World Health Organization-Tanzania, and health facilities including Temeke, Mnazi mmoja and Amana

Project Achievement

First,15 health information specialists were trained on Improving Public Access to Health Information. Second, there have been an increased number of health workers and general public visit health libraries for purpose of collecting health information. Third, there was an increased number of health information professionals joined AHILA-Tanzania Chapter. Fourth, the strong partnership among health information libraries has been improved. Lastly, promotional materials on health libraries were developed, and 55 print promotional materials on health libraries were distributed to health libraries

Constraints and Challenges

The major challenges faced during the implementing activities of the project were financial constraints. The funds allocated for the distribution of promotional materials to health Centers were not enough. The project also encountered inconveniences from health care providers to attend workshop on improving Public Access to Health Information (PAHI)

Lessons Learned

Based on the experiences of AHILA–Tanzania Chapter the lessons learned on improving and promoting public access to health information can be summed up as follows:

i. Health information professionals should join the AHILA–Tanzania Chapter. In order to promote and provide relevant and better health information to different types of community there is a need for health information professional to join AHILA Tanzania Chapter for the purpose of promoting close work relationship among Health Librarians and Health Information Professionals through the exchange and networking in health information services.

ii. Sharing of health information through AHILA–Tanzania Chapter. Health organizations generate a lot of information in form of Guidelines, technical reports, journals, manuals, books, leaflets, brochures and booklets. All these information generated in health departments, agencies and academic institutions should be shared through AHILA-Tanzania Chapter

iii. Mapping of health libraries and other stakeholders involving with health issues. There is a need to map all health libraries and other stakeholders who deal with health issues and other related information in order to facilitate networking and sharing of health information resources.

iv. Librarians should be proactive in disseminating health information to the public. Librarians should be proactive in promoting and disseminating health information to the public through organization's website, local newspaper, meetings and exhibitions.

v. Providing information literacy education. Librarians should impart knowledge of information literacy to consumers of health information

Acknowledgments

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