



Engaging Pharmacies in Covid-19 Vaccination Programme in Africa

Udokang EI^{1*}, Ibrahim AD², Francis JU³, Omolase OT⁴, Adebayo Kk⁵ and Adebisi AY⁶

¹Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Uyo, Nigeria

²Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Ilorin, Nigeria

³Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Benin, Nigeria

⁴Faculty of Pharmacy, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria

⁵Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Lagos, Nigeria

⁶Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Perspective

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***Corresponding author:** Udokang Ephraim Ikpongifono, Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Uyo, Nigeria, Email: ephraimudokang@gmail.com

Abstract

The Corona virus disease popularly known as Covid-19 was discovered in March, 2021 and has since been given critical attention by Government agencies, Pharmaceutical companies, private organizations and the health care system in order to provide remedy to damages caused by the virus. However, there are various approaches towards solving this global issue including, the use of facemasks, hand sanitizers, and maintaining of social distancing by individuals especially when in public. Furthermore, it has been discovered from studies that the best way to curtailing this issue is by provision of effective vaccines which has already been introduced and distributed to many countries around the world. No one will be safe until everyone has been vaccinated. Unfortunately, the African continent is limited by the number of available vaccination centres which are mostly government established hospitals, few private hospitals or the primary health centres. However, following the discovery of effective vaccines to help curtail the spread of the deadly Covid-19 virus which has already destroyed lives and caused serious damage to the Africa's healthcare system. Given the highly populated nature of the African continent, it is pertinent to create more centres to enhance an equitable distribution and easy access to the available vaccines by individuals of the African continent. This paper aims at emphasizing the need of involving Pharmacies in the vaccination programme in Africa.

Keywords: Covid-19; Programme; Pharmacies; Vaccination; Africa

Introduction

The Coronavirus disease (covid-19) is a transmissible respiratory disease that is mainly transmitted between people via respiratory droplets and contact routes between individuals. Transmission of the virus can occur through

contact with infected people and indirect contact with surfaces in the immediate environment of an infected individual or with objects used by infected individuals [1]. The covid-19 virus is very deadly as it has infected up to 241,491,638 individuals in the world, about 281,727,005 individuals worldwide have recovered and about 4,914,431

individuals have died from the virus [2]. With Africa recording about 60, 367, 46 cases, 148,599 deaths, and about 566,223,882 recoveries as of 17 October, 2021 when this paper was written [3]. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared this to be a public health emergency of international concern. This disorder was subsequently given a new name on February 11, 2020, i.e. COVID-19 by a WHO expert group [4].

In response to curb the spread of the virus, scientists around the world worked faster than ever to develop a vaccine that could stop the virus from spreading. It can be said that the vaccine came at the right time since the pandemic has become a major problem to lives, the economy, and every other life known to man. To recover from the havoc caused by the virus, to avoid another phase of lockdown and for activities to resume, the COVID-19 vaccine has to be equitably distributed across Africa as soon as possible. Also, to facilitate a faster and equitable distribution of the vaccines to people, it is important to involve pharmacies in the vaccination program. Pharmacies are clinical healthcare centres charged with the discovery, production, disposal, safe and effective use, and control of medications. As closest centre to the public, pharmacies are responsible for the delivery of safe, reliable, and high-quality medicines and medical services to achieve optimal health outcomes.

The world health organization identifies six main building blocks for which pharmacists can play an integral role as a member of the health care team and then a role in medical products, vaccines, and technologies. The role of pharmacists is not limited to medical products but also includes vaccines and medical devices particularly those that may require special knowledge about uses and risks, they further stated that pharmacists are responsible for ensuring the effectiveness, integrity, and safety of medical devices, products and vaccines to protect the health of patients [5]. Hence this study is aimed at elucidating reasons why pharmacies should be involved in the vaccination program in Africa.

Need to Engage Pharmacies in Covid-19 Vaccination in Africa

Accessibility of Pharmacies

Over the past few months, with the continuous ravaging of the covid-19 diseases, health workers across Africa have been essential in helping to keep the pandemic at Bay. Pharmacists around the world have continued to offer direct medical care and provide frontline services to their populations through this pandemic. With the recent approval of vaccines to provide immunity against Covid-19 and the need for the mass vaccination of the African population, there is a

need to involve as many qualified professionals and centres as possible in the vaccination process. The involvement of pharmacies in African countries would encourage and facilitate the rapid distribution of approved vaccines as they (pharmacies) make a bulk of health care places [6]. Involving pharmacies would allow for the vaccination of a larger number of people as pharmacies especially community pharmacies which are the most accessible health care facility especially in this pandemic to the people especially in local communities and urban areas [7].

Cost-Effectiveness of Vaccination

Involving pharmacies in the mass vaccination of people in Africa against Covid-19 would be a cost-effective strategy. This would save the government in African countries the cost of providing building facilities, transporting and dispersing vaccinators to various areas of their countries, having to do a public campaign to enlighten citizens on the need to take the vaccine amongst other things. The existing pharmacy buildings and infrastructures can be used as vaccination centres and pharmacists in Pharmacies can help disseminate information and enlighten locals in their vicinity.

Pharmacies as Health Care Educators

Pharmacy-based vaccination provision has become widespread over the last few decades, with rising success in vaccination rates. The role of pharmacists in vaccination practices has been identified as serving as an educator, facilitator, and vaccinator [8]. Despite the significance of COVID-19 vaccines, it has been seen that many people decide not to vaccinate due to the growing phenomena of anti-vaccination campaigns that “fake news” and “post-modern, post-actual truths” relevant to the vaccine [9]. This brings about the need to involve Pharmacies which are the nearest health centers and therefore the main source of health information to many communities in Africa in the COVID-19 vaccination plan. Pharmacies need to be involved in the COVID-19 vaccination process as they would help educate and inform the public on the importance of taking the available vaccines and also debunk the myths surrounding the vaccines and the vaccination process.

Patients Trust in Healthcare Delivery

With the effective services, pharmacies continue to render to individuals of the society in terms of counselling, follow-up on medication adherence, etc. It is believed that patients and members of the community have over time developed trust in taking medication and instructions from these essential health care providers. Hence, engaging Pharmacies will help promote individuals' attention and full participation in the vaccination program.

Decongestion of already Congested Health Care Centers

Both general and government hospitals in Africa are already congested with both in and out-patients with various health problems. This is seen as a limitation to the mass vaccination program in Africa with the adherence to the physical distancing and social gathering standard set by the world health organization to curb the spread of the pandemic. The solution to this problem is to engage Pharmacies in the vaccination program which will enable easy and fast service to the highly populated African continent. An individual can easily and quickly enter a Pharmacy store, get his or her vaccine, and leave without delay or having to travel far to where the hospital or approved centre is located.

Challenges Likely to be Faced by Pharmacies in Covid-19 Vaccination

The preparation, supply, and distribution of vaccine doses in Africa could be potentially influenced by many challenges. These include porous supply chain networks and storage facilities, inadequate electricity, insecurity, vaccine hesitancy due to widespread misinformation about COVID-19, and a health system that is already weak [10]. Vaccines that are already available against the SARS- CoV-2 virus cannot be used in African pharmacies without some challenges and issues. Experts have said that they expect some resistance from people receiving COVID-19 vaccines due to the debate on vaccines, and also due to the debate on the COVID trials in Africa. Researchers have said that adequate awareness of the vaccine is absolutely important and information needs to be given in African countries, as Africans are worried that they will be lab rats for the vaccines. This resistance and lack of adequate knowledge may pose a big problem for the pharmacies that would be involved in the vaccination process.

Quite a lot of countries in Africa cannot afford the COVID-19 vaccine. This would hinder the smooth distribution of vaccines especially by pharmacies that can't afford to be a part of the vaccination process. Although an initiative known as COVAX has been developed to accelerate the production and equitable distribution of vaccines around the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) believes only about 20% of the population from 46 countries would be able to benefit from this initiative. In many rural areas in Africa, there is barely any electricity supply, and even the major cities face frequent power failures. This issue is one that would determine the involvement of many Pharmacies in vaccine administration. Some of the vaccines to be used are to be stored at really low temperatures, for example, The BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine used in the United Kingdom has to be stored at minus 70 degrees Celsius. A large number of pharmacies

in Africa do not have the facility to store these vaccines, for now [11]. For those who have the storage facilities, the ultra-low temperature freezers would need standby generators or back-up power fuel and this is going to be quite a challenge. For the vaccines that do not require cold storage facilities like the Astrazeneca vaccine, distribution to Pharmacies across Africa could also be a major challenge [12].

Recommendations

Pharmacies are recognized as the most accessible healthcare destination for patients in both rural and remote centers. Amidst the difficulties occasioned by the pandemic, Pharmacies have continued to play their roles in the community and public health. While many medical centers adjusted, pharmacies remained open to ensure that services are delivered to the public through medication supply, disease screening, prevention, and creating of awareness. Many pharmacies also adopted digital technology and telehealth, and expanded services to include home delivery and outreach services. This, however, indicates that regulating policies to enable pharmacists to administer vaccination will promote a trained and skilled-based workforce in mass vaccination, accessibility, and uptake. African Government should also provide support and incentives to community pharmacies in distributing the vaccines. Policies that will ease the distribution of the vaccines across community pharmacies should be implemented as well. America has already made plans to collaborate with local Pharmacies across the country to assist in vaccine accessibility. This should also be approved by African leaders and initiated in all African countries for equitable access to the covid-19 vaccination [13]. The COVID-19 vaccines will likely be administered as part of a series, and dosing intervals just like other vaccines, ensuring a consistent recording system for vaccine details is necessary, and current vaccination status needs to be accessed frequently to optimize vaccination coverage [14]. Community pharmacies are seen as the immediate and closest healthcare point of contact by patients and the general public requiring healthcare services. This has been confirmed before and after the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, engaging pharmacies in pandemics is crucial owing to the specialized and professional training of Pharmacists to provide solutions to healthcare problems [15].

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed uncertainties worldwide. Hence, the current global focus being on mass vaccination. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of pharmacies in the fight against covid-19 in the healthcare delivery system. It has also revealed major roles that pharmacies occupy during this health crisis. Therefore

pharmacies should be considered in the workforce planning to enable quick and large-scale COVID-19 vaccination.

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