

Leveraging Public Libraries for Community Health: A Case Study of Cancer Awareness Initiatives by the Anambra State Library Board (2016–2025)

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Abstract

This study explores the pivotal role of the Anambra State Library Board in promoting cancer awareness through its health information services from 2016 to 2025, aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing). Public libraries globally have evolved into critical community health hubs by providing equitable access to health information, especially for underserved populations. Using a qualitative case study, this paper documents the planning, partnerships, and activities conducted annually to mark International Cancer Day. Findings reveal significant gaps in public knowledge about cancer symptoms, prevention, and early screening, compounded by barriers such as fear and financial constraints. Real-life survivor narratives underscored the life-saving potential of early detection. The study recommends sustained multi-sectoral partnerships, digital health integration, and geographic expansion of outreach across Anambra State to improve health literacy and outcomes.

Keywords: Health Information Services, Cancer Awareness, Nigerian Public Libraries, Library Partnerships, Health Literacy, Community Health

Introduction

Health is a fundamental determinant of individual and national development, encapsulated in the adages “a healthy nation is a wealthy nation” and “health is wealth.” Health and well-being are vital resources that enable individuals to thrive and reach their full potential. Access to accurate and timely health information is essential, as many people have made poor decisions regarding their health due to misinformation or ignorance. Information plays a critical role in guiding decision-making and problem-solving processes; without the right information, individuals are prone to making avoidable mistakes. Health information is therefore fundamental to the well-being of the citizenry. Access to accurate and timely health information empowers individuals to make informed decisions regarding prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, thereby reducing avoidable

health risks (Parker & Kreps, 2005). However, low levels of health literacy remain an ongoing concern, particularly in many low- and middle-income countries such as Nigeria.

Public libraries have evolved beyond their traditional roles as repositories of books and literacy centres to become vital community hubs that support a broad spectrum of social and educational needs. As community information centres, public libraries have taken on expanded roles in promoting health literacy by providing health-related information and services to underserved populations (Karki et al, 2024). Increasingly, they are recognized as valuable partners in public health promotion, leveraging their accessibility, trusted status, and community engagement to address health disparities and improve public health outcomes. In many communities, especially those with limited access to healthcare, public libraries serve as critical points for disseminating health information, hosting health programmes, and linking patrons to healthcare services. This evolving role is particularly significant in regions where health literacy and access to preventive care remain limited.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to transform the world. They represent a global call to action to end poverty and inequality, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy health, justice, and prosperity, with an emphasis on leaving no one behind (United Nations, 2015). In alignment with SDG 3, which promotes good health and well-being, the Anambra State Library Board initiated community-based cancer awareness programmes to reduce cancer-related mortality. Cancer is a leading cause of death worldwide, accounting for nearly 10 million deaths in 2020, with early detection being critical for improved survival (WHO, 2025). Being a major health concern in Nigeria and globally, cancer requires widespread awareness to encourage early detection, prevention, and management. This paper documents the collaborative efforts of the Anambra State Library Board to promote community health through cancer awareness initiatives conducted in observance of International Cancer Day from 2016 to 2025.

Literature Review

Public libraries are widely regarded as trusted community institutions and reliable sources of health information. Their free and open access makes them particularly effective in addressing social inequities, as they offer opportunities and resources to underserved and marginalized populations (Downing, 2024). They thus function as multifaceted community institutions that not only provide

information resources but also serve as meeting spaces, educational centres, and catalysts for community development. In recent years, their role in public health has gained increasing recognition. Research highlights their capacity to reduce health disparities at the neighbourhood level by offering reliable health information, facilitating access to healthcare services, and hosting health-related programmes in collaboration with local organizations and health professionals (Philbin et al., 2019; Hodges, 2022). One key area of impact is health literacy, where public libraries have emerged as vital support systems (Parker & Kreps, 2005; Zisonts et al., 2010). They serve as accessible venues for health information dissemination and outreach, especially in underserved communities. Scholars such as Hollander (2000) and IGI Global (2023) emphasize libraries' growing involvement in advancing public health literacy through outreach initiatives, curated health resources, and strategic partnerships. These collaborations, particularly with health professionals, are shown to be effective in enhancing public understanding and awareness of health issues (Kaser, 2015; Ntlotlang & Grand, 2016).

Globally, libraries have embraced innovative, collaborative approaches to support health and well-being within their communities. In Armenia, the Lori Regional Library has leveraged information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate online medical consultations, connecting patrons directly with healthcare professionals. In Ghana, the Northern Regional Library partnered with non-governmental organizations to improve maternal health by sending SMS messages containing essential health information to pregnant women. More than 90 women received text messages with advice, health tips to guide them through pregnancy, and reminders to visit clinics for check-ups. Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, the Libraries Consortium launched a nationwide campaign titled "No to TB," engaging 190 libraries in a coordinated effort to raise awareness and mobilize communities against tuberculosis. In the United States, public libraries have gone even further by offering telemedicine services, organizing opioid overdose prevention programmes, and hosting COVID-19 vaccination drives (EIFL, 2025; Downing, 2024). These initiatives are typically conducted in partnership with other agencies and organizations. For example, the Free Library of Philadelphia has implemented multiple community programmes through its Healthy Library Initiative, a collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania. Downing also noted that a recent survey conducted by the Colorado Area Health Education Centre, the Colorado State Library, and the STAR Library Network revealed a strong interest in such partnerships, with 72%

of public libraries in Colorado expressing willingness to work with public health departments to improve health programming in their communities. Strengthening these partnerships would provide mutual benefits for both libraries and public health agencies, as well as the populations they serve. Beyond public libraries, academic libraries have also demonstrated their capacity to deliver health information services. A notable example is the role played by academic medical libraries in China during the pandemic era (Meng et al., 2025).

Among various health information needs, cancer has emerged as a critical focus due to its rising incidence and high mortality rates (NCI, 2021; Bhurgri et al., 2008). Libraries, recognizing this urgent need, have increasingly integrated cancer awareness and prevention into their health outreach initiatives, often in collaboration with health organizations and advocacy groups. Partnerships with health departments and community organizations have enabled libraries to provide direct health services such as screenings, vaccinations, and targeted health education campaigns (Philbin et al., 2019). Notably, larger library systems have successfully implemented preventive health programmes focused on chronic diseases and cancer risk factors by inviting licensed health experts to deliver seminars and provide screenings within the library setting (Patil, 2020). Moreover, libraries often employ specialized health librarians and trained staff who assist patrons in navigating complex medical information, thereby strengthening health literacy among diverse and at-risk populations (Philbin et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2018). Their ability to reach vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, low-income families, seniors, and individuals with limited internet access, makes them ideal platforms for delivering cancer awareness and prevention programmes. These may include educational workshops, distribution of informational materials, and personalized support services (Wahowiak, 2018; Hawkins et al., 2018).

Public libraries in Nigeria are similarly positioned to support community health through the provision of relevant information resources and services. However, research indicates challenges related to resource adequacy and utilization, suggesting a need for enhanced strategies to maximize their role in public health promotion (Enweani, 2023). Leveraging the existing infrastructure and community trust of the Anambra State Library Board to implement targeted cancer awareness initiatives could thus represent a significant step toward improving health literacy and outcomes in the State and its communities.

Methodology

This study presents a content analysis of cancer awareness programmes conducted by a state public library over a ten-year period, aiming to enhance professional understanding of how public libraries can contribute to community health improvement through effective planning and strategic partnerships. It also seeks to offer practical insights for other libraries on designing and implementing health information programmes.

This qualitative case study draws on library records, planning documents, partner contributions, and participant feedback collected from 2016 to 2025. Data were analyzed descriptively to examine the scope of the programmes, collaboration strategies, community engagement methods, and observed outcomes.

Case Description: Cancer Awareness Initiatives (2016–2025)

A. *Planning and Coordination Activities*

The Anambra State Library Board, headquartered in Awka, the state capital, operates a network of branch and divisional libraries across various towns. This extensive reach enabled the cancer awareness programmes to extend beyond the capital, connecting with multiple communities through these local outlets. Local partners were engaged and inspired to support the initiatives as acts of philanthropy and community service.

Planning for the annual cancer awareness events was carried out collaboratively with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based groups, and traditional leaders. Over the years, a series of planning and coordination meetings were held:

- In 2016, the Library Board partnered with the Ministry of Health and the Nigerian Society for the Eradication of Cancer, initiating foundational discussions for the programme.
- In 2016 and 2017, meetings were also held with the President General of Adazi Nnukwu, who played a supportive role in mobilizing the local community.
- In 2018, additional collaborators included the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), Onitsha, and R&S Lotto, contributing to expanded outreach.
- In 2019, a planning meeting was held with the Proprietor of Gran Hermano Academy, Awka, to organize an outreach event in Ihembosi.

- In 2020, planning discussions involved representatives from Nkpologwu, helping to bring the programme to that community.
- In 2021, Agbalenze Reginald Arazu sponsored the cancer screening in Ihembosi, demonstrating strong individual support. That same year, planning meetings were also held with the Development Initiative for Technology and Empowerment and the Marjorie Bash Foundation to support cancer awareness activities in Onitsha.
- In 2022, the team met with representatives from Ozubulu to plan that year's awareness programme.
- In 2023, the team engaged with the leaders of Ukwulu Market in Awka South Local Government Area of the state to discuss how the awareness programme would be carried out. They agreed it should be held on a market day so that many people- including men, women, and youths- could benefit. The market leaders fixed the time for the programme and suggested the best location to install the public address system for optimal coverage.
- In 2024, the awareness programme was sponsored by Chief Ikeokwu (Agunze), also demonstrating strong individual support.
- In 2025, due to the success of previous awareness activities and sustained interest, the programme was held again in Ihembosi and Onitsha. The Board sponsored the Ihembosi event and collaborated with some NGOs to organize the event at the Onitsha Divisional Library.

These collaborative planning sessions typically addressed issues such as site selection, logistics, role allocation, and resource mobilization. Materials developed for the events included solicitation letters, invitation letters for participants and guest speakers (including cancer survivors and resource persons), flyers, and branded T-shirts bearing cancer awareness messages, all of which were incorporated into the planning framework. To maximize reach and participation, events were held in various locations across the state: Awka and Adazi Nnukwu in 2016; Adazi Nnukwu in 2017; Onitsha in 2018; Ihembosi in 2019; Nkpologwu in 2020; Ihembosi again in 2021; Ozubulu in 2022; Ukwulu in 2023; Umuokpu in 2024; and finally, Ihembosi and Onitsha in 2025.

The library continues to make efforts to ensure that every town benefit from the programme by rotating awareness events from one community to another. This strategic rotation of venues ensured community engagement and broad-based impact. This collaborative planning model

aligns with global best practices, where multi-sectoral partnerships are essential for sustaining impactful public health programmes (Philbin et al., 2019; EIFL, 2025).

B. Implementation of Activities

Cancer Walks: Cancer walks serve as public events that attract diverse community members, increasing awareness about cancer risks, prevention, and the importance of screening. As such, one of the key implementation strategies was organizing cancer awareness walks in selected towns. These processions featured banners displaying images of various types of cancer, informational flyers, branded T-shirts, music, and local media coverage. These elements combined to create a vibrant and informative atmosphere that captured public attention.

Between 2016 and 2025, cancer awareness walks were conducted in Awka, Onitsha, and Ihembosi- sometimes featuring placards and typically accompanied by the distribution of informational flyers. To ensure safety and proper coordination, personnel from the Federal Road Safety Corps were engaged to guide participants during the walks.

Each event concluded at a central venue, where health education talks and free cancer screenings were provided. This approach reflects the model used in Abuja's annual World Cancer Day Walk (WCDW), which serves as a platform for promoting public awareness of cancer risk factors, preventive lifestyle strategies, and the importance of early screening as critical components of cancer prevention and control (Leibel et al., 2022).



Fig.1: 2018 Cancer Walk in collaboration with JPDC and R&S Lotto Ltd.



Fig.2: 2019 cancer walk at Ihembosi in collaboration with Gran Hemano Academy, Awka.



Fig.3: Picture taken after the 2021 cancer walk at Onitsha in collaboration with Development initiative for technology and empowerment, and Majorie Bash Foundation.



Fig. 4: 2021 Cancer awareness at Ihembosi



Fig. 5: Picture taken after the 2023 cancer walk at Onitsha

Health Talks: Delivered by medical professionals in both English and local dialects, these sessions covered the causes, symptoms, prevention, and treatment of cancer. Visual aids and real-life stories were used to enhance understanding. This bilingual approach is especially important in regions with diverse linguistic groups (Hawkins et al., 2018). The venue and focus of each cancer talk were often influenced by the audience. In 2016, the events were held at the Prof. Kenneth Dike State Central eLibrary, Awka, and the Adazi Nnukwu Community Library. In 2017, the talk took place at the Adazi Nnukwu Community Library, while in 2018 it was hosted at the Onitsha Divisional Library. In 2019, the programme was held at the Branch Library, Ihembosi. In 2020, one health talk took place at the CWO Hall, St. Anthony Catholic Church, while another was held

at Enuama Hall, Nkpologwu. In 2021, talks were conducted at the Branch Library, Ihembosi, and at the Divisional Library, Onitsha. In 2022, the programme was hosted at the Branch Library, Ozubulu. In 2023, health talks were simultaneously held in Onitsha and Ukwulu. The Onitsha event took place at the Onitsha Divisional Library, where participants gathered, while the Ukwulu event was conducted at Afor Ukwulu Market. A public address system was installed at a strategic location in the market to ensure optimal coverage. A medical doctor delivered a brief talk on various types of cancer, followed by a question-and-answer session. Library staff also distributed flyers stall by stall to both women and men. In 2024, the awareness campaign was held at Timber Market, Umuokpu, in Awka South LGA. In 2025, the health talk was held at the Branch Library, Ihembosi. Since most traders and buyers in Timber Umuokpu are men of various ages, the health talk focused primarily on prostate enlargement and prostate cancer, conditions that are prevalent in Nigeria and often go undetected due to limited access to regular health check-ups. At other times, talks have also addressed topics such as the benefits of consuming organic foods, the importance of early detection, and the need for regular medical screenings. A question-and-answer session typically concludes each event, allowing participants to seek clarifications and engage directly with medical experts.



Fig. 6: 2018 health talks at Onitsha Divisional Library



Fig. 7: Participants listening to a health expert



Fig. 8: A health expert delivering a health talk in 2019

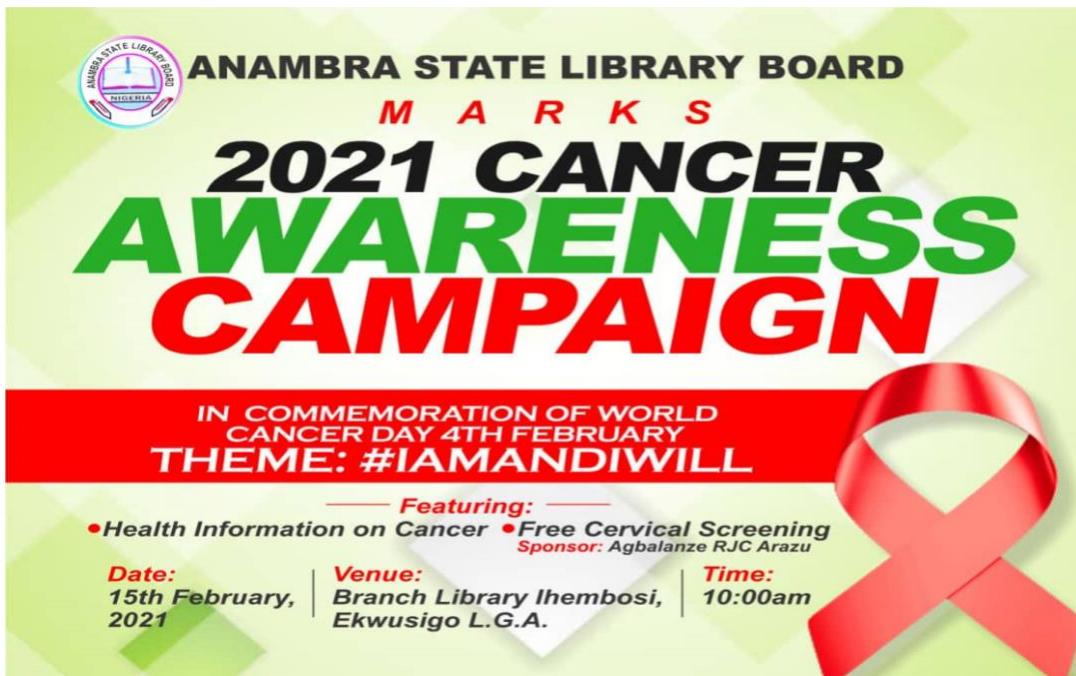


Fig.9: Poster showing the free cancer screening and the name of the sponsor at Ihembosi

Real-life Narratives: Survivors and relatives shared personal experiences during library-organized cancer awareness programmes, highlighting the life-saving importance of early detection. The World Health Organization (2024b) has recognized storytelling as a powerful tool in health communication, emphasizing that stories humanize complex health issues and foster emotional engagement that factual data alone often fails to achieve. By drawing audiences into the lived experiences of individuals, storytelling can influence health knowledge, shape attitudes, and inspire positive behavioural change. Through such initiatives, the library effectively bridges the gap between information and action, reinforcing its role as a catalyst for improved community health outcomes. This approach aligns with studies such as Nduka et al. (2025), and Kovacic & Gertz (2022) whose research supports the value of personal narratives in public health education.

C. Partnerships and Collaborations

The programme's success was anchored in sustained partnerships with health institutions, civil society organizations, non-governmental institutions and individuals. Sponsors provided resources such as cancer screening services, media coverage, refreshments, and logistical support. This aligns with evidence that library-health partnerships enhance outreach and resource availability.

Findings and Discussion

The major findings that emerged are as follows:

1. **Low Awareness of Cancer:** Most participants lacked knowledge of cancer symptoms, preventive measures, and the importance of regular screening. This mirrors global challenges in health literacy, especially in low-resource settings (WHO, 2024a).
2. **Barriers to Cancer Screening:** Fear of diagnosis, financial constraints, and lack of awareness about preventive check-ups were key obstacles to cancer screening. These barriers lowered the perceived benefits and heightened the perceived costs, thereby discouraging screening uptake. Notably, a few participants who underwent screening were referred to the hospital after suspicious findings were detected, underscoring the importance of early screening and timely referral.
3. **Survivor Narratives as a Communication Tool:** The use of cancer survivor narratives was instrumental in addressing fear and misinformation among participants. By sharing real-life stories of individuals who underwent early detection and successful treatment, these narratives helped humanize the disease and foster hope. This approach aligns with Cheld's (2025) report, which suggests that showcasing positive outcomes of early-stage diagnosis increases acceptance of screening and improves health-seeking behaviour.
4. **Role of Partnerships in Bridging Gaps:** Collaborative partnerships with health institutions and civil society organizations helped bridge critical information and resource gaps. These alliances highlighted the potential of public libraries to serve as effective intermediaries in delivering community health services and information.

Conclusion

The Anambra State Library Board's cancer awareness initiatives from 2016 to 2025 exemplify the expanding role of public libraries in community health promotion. Through strategic partnerships, culturally sensitive programming, and community engagement, libraries can effectively raise awareness about critical health issues like cancer.

Recommendations

1. Continuous Public Sensitization: Regular campaigns emphasizing the importance of early detection and routine health check-ups, utilizing culturally appropriate communication strategies.
2. Promotion of Healthy Lifestyles: Integrate practical demonstrations of healthy diets and physical activities during events.
3. Expansion of Outreach: Extend awareness efforts to more communities across Anambra State by strengthening partnerships with health departments, NGOs, and media outlets.
4. Digital Health Integration: Leverage digital platforms and the WHO Global Health Library to provide up-to-date cancer information and facilitate virtual health talks and screenings.
5. Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish feedback and impact assessment mechanisms to refine programmes and demonstrate outcomes, supporting sustainability and funding.

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