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Article

SCHOOL LIBRARIES: A VERITABLE TOOL FOR HIV/AIDS INFORMATION DISSEMINATION AND AWARENESS

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Abstract

This paper discussed the vital role the school library plays in disseminating correct information on HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS is a global life threatening epidemic which has defied efforts at producing a vaccine and a cure. It continues to sweep across the globe, leaving a terrible trail of human destruction. Prevention through right information remains the most effective way of curbing the spread as the disease is here with us. Young adults are seen as one of the groups especially vulnerable to this disease as they account for a higher percentage of new infections recorded every year. This is because of their involvement in risky sexual behaviours as well as the myths and misconceptions surrounding HIV/AIDS. The main thrust of the paper was that information given at the right time is very essential as it helps one to make informed decisions. The school library was therefore portrayed as being in a better position to pass this HIV/AIDS information to these ones as early as possible. The HIV/AIDS education should be aimed at keeping the school age population informed about the dangers and how to protect themselves and other people.

Introduction

AIDS is a globally acclaimed pandemic disease which has been rated the number one killer disease in Africa with highest impact on women, young adults and children (UNAIDS,2004). This could be as a result of their vulnerability and inability to make decisions on issues relating to reproductive health. Stigmatization and discrimination faced by people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) from the general public may prevent people from going for HIV tests. This stigmatization may be due to ignorance about the disease, its mode of transmission, prevention, care and treatment.

There are many misconceptions about HIV/AIDS and sex due to incorrect information, thus contributing to the increasing rate of transmission as well as stigmatization and discrimination towards PLWHA. Owing to these misconceptions, many people are afraid of knowing their HIV status thereby increasing their risky sexual behaviours.

Correct information on issues relating to HIV/AIDS remains a major way in solving the problem of new infections, discrimination, stigmatization, care and support.

Irwin et al (2003) asserted that across Africa, between eighty and ninety percent of HIV infections occur through sexual intercourse, which is mainly heterosexual. This is unlike the pattern in Europe and North America as reported by Iwere (1990) where AIDS is being mainly spread by homosexual contact and the sharing of needles for intravenous drug abuse. By implication, all sexually active persons in sub Saharan Africa are at the risk of contracting AIDS. This is buttressed by the UNAIDS report (2004) in which out of the 33 million adults aged between 15 and 49 living with HIV globally as at the end of 2003, a whopping 22 million were from sub Saharan Africa.

Another worrisome aspect of the problem is the phenomenal number of infected women and children. Women alone accounts 13 million out of the 22 million HIV infections in sub Saharan Africa as at the end of 2003 (UNAIDS, 2004). Little wonder then that a United Nations Agency representative speaking at the launch of the UNAIDS annual report on the AIDS pandemic in 2004 expressed that the AIDS pandemic rampaging around the globe will not be stopped without radical change to improve the lot of women and girls, who now look likely to die in greater number than men.

According to Rapu (2007), Information remains a key tool for arresting the spread of AIDS. As with any epidemic for which there is no cure, tragedy shadows the disease's advance. Developing nations often lack the means and funding to support the advanced treatment available in industrialized countries. Because of the magnitude of the disease in Africa and in sub Saharan Africa in particular, the government of this region has tried to fight the disease in a variety of ways with special emphasis on information awareness and education for prevention. In the absence of financial resources to pay for new drug therapies, many African nations, Nigeria inclusive have found education to be the best defense against the disease.

Brittanica (2007) noted that 4 to 6 million Nigerians are estimated to be infected with HIV and wrote that given the government's limited resources and inability to deal adequately with this problem, that number is expected to more than double by 2010. This prediction however had been proved false as Lawrence (2010) quoting National Population Commission (NPC) and the National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA) reported that an estimated three million Nigerians will be living with the

Human Immuno Deficiency Virus/ Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. She wrote that according to the experts, the spread of the virus in Nigeria was stable going by statistics from 2001 to 2008. The high prevalence in 2001 was 5.8; 2003, 5.0; 2005, 4.4 and 2008, 4.6 percent respectively. She also quoted NACA's Strategic Knowledge Management Deputy Director, Dr Gregory Ashefor as asserting that there had been increase in the level of awareness by the government and other nongovernmental organizations to contain the spread of the disease. If this is true, extra efforts by school libraries will definitely slash down the statistics further. The school library is thus an important tool for information awareness as it deals with catching them young and inculcating the right values and decisions through spreading the correct information and educating the children so that they can make informed decisions on sex.

The Informational Role of School Libraries

A school library is a library attached to and managed by a school to serve the students, staff, and often, parents of the state or private owned school (www.wikipedia.org, 2008). The school library is supposed to serve pupils and students who are within the primary and post primary levels of education. A standard school library should be well equipped and organized. It should be provided with journals, magazines and textbooks on various subjects, audiovisual materials like films, recorded sound and other relevant media and materials. These items are not only for the enjoyment and entertainment of the pupils, but to expand the school curriculum. The objective of a good educational system is to equip individuals to be able to play their role in the society and a school library attempts to advance this objective.

The school library serves as a resource centre and so contains more audio visual and graphic materials such as pictures, photographs, realia, diagrams, etc than other types of libraries. According to Hall (1986), the school library as a resource centre is expected to provide a learning laboratory that provides opportunity for pupils to develop information skills and develop a commitment to informal decision making among others. School libraries' provides supplement to the teaching of school children. The librarian or teacher librarian is in charge of the school library and collaborates with the classroom teachers to assist students with research and advance the students' information literacy and technology skills. The school library thus plays a dual role as it serves to enhance the school curriculum as well as develop in the students, information skills needed for informal decision making.

The Place of School Libraries in Information Awareness and Dissemination

It is a well known saying that information availability does not mean information accessibility. Nwalo (2000) observed that information could result from social, scientific and technological researches and that enormous quantity of information is generated all over the world today due to increase in research and development activities and interdisciplinary research, thereby resulting in what is known as information explosion. Aina (2004) while concurring with this phenomenon noted that an individual can have access to only a small fraction of the available information generated, hence it is important to design mechanisms for providing appropriate and timely information to individuals who need it from the mass of information regularly generated.

Libraries have the responsibility and capability of acquiring information materials, documenting original information on various subjects of interest to the society and putting those materials acquired at the disposal of societal members to satisfy their information needs (Nwalo, 2000). Olanlokun and Salisu (1993) sees a library as an agency which engages in the collection, processing, preservation and dissemination of recorded information in various formats most convenient to its users. The systematic acquisition, organization and dissemination of books, not mere label, distinguished a library from either a reading room or a store house of books (Nwalo, 2003).

Libraries in this information age are fast making a quick get away from the traditional mode of organization and dissemination of information through just books alone and the school library is not an exception. Items collected in the school library have been broadened to include toys, computers, study kits and all types of audio visual materials. The Internet with the World Wide Web offers a world of opportunities for the library but the big question is, how many librarians have been able to acquire the necessary skills required for optimal use of these new technologies in order to meet their own needs and that of the society? School libraries in Nigeria have been known to be trailed with a lot of problems most of which also affects other types of libraries. Some of the problems include: poor perception of the importance of the library by the people, inadequate funding, poor maintenance culture whereby the acquired materials are not properly taken care of (may also be referred to as poor preservation and conservation measures), and so on.

Why School libraries should Rise up to the HIV/AIDS Challenge

HIV/AIDS awareness activity carried out by the school library will hit right on target saving whole generations. Taking the message of HIV/AIDS to these young people, the Universal Declaration of Human Right of 1948 states that "everyone has a right to education" (Aguolu, 1994). Right because it gives people the ability to develop their full potentials. Education equips people with information. In a statement credited to IFLA and FAIFE initiative, Malekani (2005) expressed that the right to access information is vital for any society. If citizens are to participate and make informed choices, they must have access to knowledge, thought, culture and information.

Awareness education is necessary because each year, there are more new infections, which shows that people either are not learning the message about the dangers of HIV or are unwilling to act on it. Education on HIV/AIDS is an important part of AIDS prevention. It is especially important that school libraries take up this task as an article on www.avert.org quoting the Nigerian's STD/HIV Control estimated that of all new HIV infection occurs in young people between the ages of 15 and 25. Furthermore, the World Bank (2002) in line with this expressed that in the context of HIV and AIDS, studies indicate that young people are among the highly affected groups, females being the most infected. The fact that these young people constitutes a major part of potential school library users shows that any ones as early as possible is highly imperative as a study by Slap et al (2002) indicated that by 13 years, over a quarter of a sample of secondary school students in Plateau State have had sexual intercourse.

Conclusion

Education has been seen as an important part of AIDS prevention programmes in the absence of a cure and a vaccine for HIV/AIDS. It is imperative that school librarians join this train and use their information acquisition, repackaging and disseminating skills to disseminate correct information about HIV/AIDS to the library users. The school library in particular should get involved in HIV/AIDS information dissemination as it is in the best position to catch them young. The earlier this is done, the better for the society at large as an information becomes useless when it is not delivered at the right time. There is no use crying over an already split milk as a stitch in time saves nine. Let us all arise to fight this terrible pandemic of our time.

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