

Appraisal of the knowledge and attitude of Nigerian nurses toward leprosy

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Summary The attitudes of nurses toward leprosy are studied and in this paper The findings show that their knowledge of leprosy is lacking and that they also fear leprosy. This study recommends that leprosy should be included in the basic nursing curriculum in order to increase awareness and to decrease the stigma of leprosy.

Introduction

‘When a country has a problem of leprosy, all professional and auxillary staff in their basic training should be given an understanding of the disease’.¹

Nurses are the largest group of health professionals in Nigeria. While it is possible to run a primary health care centre without a doctor, it would be unrealistic to operate one without a nurse on the staff list.

With about 200,000 registered leprosy cases in Nigeria the Nigerian Government is rightly giving control of leprosy the priority it needs, and has therefore decided to implement leprosy control using the primary health care approach.

For this strategy to succeed, the personnel who form the pivot of primary health care, i.e. nurses, should possess sufficient knowledge and a positive attitude vis-à-vis leprosy if effective health care delivery is to be assured for the patients suffering from this disease.

Because of this, a study was undertaken to discover how much was known about, and the attitudes of Nigerian nurses towards leprosy patients.

Materials and methods

Having obtained approval for the study from the National Council of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives, letters and a sample of the questionnaire were sent to 1 nursing school in each of the 21 states of the Federation and the Federal Capital territory, Abuja. Those interested in contributing to the study were requested to supply information using the form provided and return it to the medical officer in charge of Kaduna State Leprosy

Table 1.

School code	School name	Average score out of 30 questions
1	School of Nursing, Kano, Kano State	13.2 (44)*
2	School of Nursing, FTC, Abuja	16.4 (55)
3	School of Nursing, Portharcourt, Rivers State	14.0 (47)
4	School of Nursing, UNTH, Anambra State	16.7 (56)
5	School of Nursing, ABUTH, Kaduna State	16.1 (54)
6	School of Nursing, Wusasa, Kaduna State	15.0 (50)
7	School of Nursing, Sokoto, Sokoto State	13.2 (44)
8	School of Nursing, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State	14.3 (48)
9	School of Nursing, Maiduguri, Borno State	14.5 (48)
10	School of Nursing, Abeokuta, Ogun State	16.2 (54)

* Numbers in parentheses are percentages.

Control Services. There were positive responses from 14 nursing schools and 30 sets of questionnaires were sent to each of these schools to be filled in by their final year students. However, only 10 schools returned the filled-in questionnaires (Table 1).

A total of 278 filled-in questionnaires from these 10 nursing schools were then analysed to discover the knowledge and attitude of Nigerian nurses.

There were 45 questions—30 were used to appraise knowledge and 15 were used to appraise the nurses' attitude vis-à-vis leprosy.

Results (Tables 1 and 2)

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of the questionnaires.

Discussion

Leprosy is a disease adversely affecting the body of the patient and the mind of the unaffected public. But the caring professions cannot blame the public for this when the majority of the medical profession, especially nurses, continues to treat leprosy as a disease that is apart from all the others.

The present study reveals a below-average basic knowledge and a largely negative perception of leprosy by most of the respondents in this study—findings that leave a lot to be desired.

Any leprologist of experience will agree that the effect on the lay public of a qualified nurse, posted to a primary health care centre, who knows nothing about leprosy, and is obviously afraid to touch a leprosy patient—which could describe about 65% of the respondents in this study—would be very negative.

Empirical evidence reveals that fortunately the younger members of the nursing profession do not suffer the intense fear of leprosy which still prevails amongst the older generation. This group of younger medical workers forms a vast and important 'captive

Table 2. Response

Comment	Strongly agree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1 Leprosy is highly infectious	71 (26)*	108 (39)	15 (6)	56 (20)	28 (10)
2 Many nurses would wish to work in leprosy hospitals	23 (8)	21 (8)	83 (30)	76 (27)	75 (27)
3 Nursing of leprosy patients is a dirty job	124 (44)	83 (30)	3 (1)	49 (18)	19 (7)
4 There are no career prospects as far as nursing practice in leprosy hospitals is concerned	64 (23)	51 (18)	91 (33)	50 (18)	22 (8)
5 The children of leprosy patients invariably become lepers themselves	102 (37)	82 (30)	8 (3)	63 (23)	23 (8)
6 Patients with leprosy should ideally be isolated	87 (31)	123 (44)	16 (6)	38 (14)	14 (5)
7 Most workers in leprosy hospitals usually contract the disease	48 (17)	64 (23)	46 (17)	89 (32)	31 (11)
8 The commonest presentation of leprosy is deformed limbs	72 (26)	115 (41)	8 (3)	56 (20)	27 (10)
9 It would be better to treat leprosy patients in general hospitals instead of 'special' leprosy hospitals	40 (14)	52 (19)	38 (14)	102 (37)	46 (17)
10 Deformities are an inevitable consequence of leprosy	101 (36)	82 (30)	24 (9)	60 (22)	11 (4)
11 If one had a choice, it is better to contract leprosy than the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)	50 (18)	63 (23)	41 (15)	46 (17)	78 (28)
12 Health workers in leprosy hospitals are mediocre with no hope of alternative employment	22 (8)	46 (17)	54 (19)	123 (44)	33 (12)
13 Nurses should be given extra allowances for taking the risk of working in leprosy hospitals	96 (35)	84 (30)	11 (4)	40 (14)	33 (12)
14 It may be difficult to find a suitable husband if a spinster nurse works in a leprosy hospital	121 (44)	69 (25)	25 (9)	38 (14)	25 (9)
15 Working in a leprosy hospital is one of the best ways of exhibiting a humanitarian nature	88 (32)	123 (44)	52 (19)	12 (4)	3 (1)

* Numbers in parentheses are percentages.

audience'. They *must* receive a basic training in leprosy that should include the formation of positive attitudes to the disease and clinical contacts with the patients.

Officials of the National Council of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives should liaise with officials of the National Tuberculosis and Leprosy Control Programme in order to review the basic nursing curriculum and include lectures and practical training on leprosy. The inclusion of simple facts about leprosy in the nursing curriculum will not only help in the early detection of leprosy, but would also help to destigmatize the disease. This aspect is particularly important as the lay public see nurses as role models vis-à-vis attitudes to all diseases.

Acknowledgment

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Reference

¹ Who Expert Committee (1976).

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Estimation des connaissances et de l'attitude des infirmiers nigériens envers la lèpre

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Résumé Les attitudes des infirmiers envers la lèpre sont étudiées et, dans cette communication, les résultats obtenus montrent que leurs connaissances de la lèpre sont insuffisantes et qu'en plus, ils ont peur de la lèpre. Cette étude recommande que la lèpre soit inscrite au curriculum de base de la formation des infirmiers, afin de les rendre plus conscients de la maladie, et de réduire le stigma attaché à la lèpre.

Una apreciación de los conocimientos y actitudes de las enfermeras nigerinas a la lepra

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Resumen Las actitudes de enfermeras en Nigeria a la lepra han sido estudiadas en esta publicación y los resultados demuestran que sus conocimientos de la lepra es deficiente y que temen la lepra. Este estudio recomienda la inclusión de la lepra en el programa básico de estudios para enfermeras, para aumentar la conciencia y reducir el stigma de la lepra.