



Analyzing Trends in Press Coverage of Hypertension in Nigeria

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author OCC conducted the field work, developed the first draft of the report. Author AEC reviewed the report particularly issues related to hypertension disease and handled the statistical analysis. The final manuscript was presented after both authors had read and accepted the inputs.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Health communication has relevance on virtually every aspect of health and well-being including disease prevention, health promotion and quality of life. The Newspaper may not tell people what to think but can tell its readers what to think about thereby influencing how audience perceive and understand issues. This study assesses Newspaper coverage of hypertension in Nigeria.

Methods: Coverage of hypertension in three Nigerian newspapers between 2011 and 2013 was done using article counts, space, location, story type and source. This study was done in year 2013. The study was studied to evaluate the trend and level of improvement on Hypertension coverage. Three papers (Guardian, This Day, and Vanguard) were selected using simple random sampling from a list of twelve renowned national journals with widest circulation. Month of May was purposively selected for the study as the world marks hypertension day on the 17th of May every year.

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Results: There were 48 (47.5%) opinion/ feature stories, 39 (38.6%) straight news stories and no editorial on Hypertension. Most, 86 (85.1%) stories on Hypertension were covered by staff. The newspapers carried no stories on the front and back pages. However, 88(87.1%) were illustrated. Majority, 32 (31.7%) of the stories were 16-30 inches in length. Messages on Hypertension carried by the newspapers increased from 27 (26.7%) stories in 2011 to 41 (40.6%) stories in 2013. Out of 28992 stories the newspapers had in the period studied, 101 (0.34%) stories were on hypertension.

Conclusion: The Newspapers have made some committed effort in the coverage of hypertension but they did not give much prominence or frequent coverage to stories on issues on hypertension.

Keywords: Hypertension; health communication; newspaper; trend; analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the key aspects of development potential of the mass media is health communication. The mass media - print, television, radio and internet – have an unparalleled reach as a communication mechanism. Communicating information on health and health related topics through mass media is increasingly used to educate and prevent non-communicable diseases. Health communication have relevance for virtually every aspect of health and well-being, including disease prevention, health promotion and quality of life [1]. It can take many forms written or verbal and can be directed toward individuals, communities or entire nation. Conversely, Health communication is an integral component of health promotion, health protection, disease prevention and treatment. It is recognized as a core component in public health and health promotion practice, playing a pivotal role in achieving public health objectives. Health communication initiatives must use the most effective and efficient strategies for the promotion, protection and maintenance of health through the use of the best available evidence at practice and policy level [2]. It is essential for the wellbeing of a society.

In the article entitled Health Coverage in Mass Media: a Content Analysis the author averred that many people rely on the news media for their health-related information [3]. Health topics can be in form of news, editorials, and features [3]. Policy makers also obtain considerable amount of information from the media. Another article entitled A Content Analysis of Cancer News Coverage in Appalachian Ohio Community Newspapers, asserted that the mass media are an alternative, though perhaps primary source people rely on for health information [4]. It further noted that the media enjoy the position of being instrumental to and explicitly involved in society's shared understanding and knowledge of health issues [4]. It behooves media practitioners and

public health experts to seek and/or improve areas of collaboration for improved health outcome in the society [4].

Communication is indispensable in any human activity, including health. The mass media is vital for the creation of awareness to large heterogeneous audience and the society at large. Mass media campaigns can directly and indirectly produce positive changes or prevent negative changes in health related behaviors across large populations [5]. Media campaigns that shape the treatment of a public health issue by news and entertainment media also represent a promising complementary strategy.

It has substantial power in framing issues like how we should think about public health issues [6]. The mass media do not only serve the function of providing information to the public but also have a combined role of educating them on health threats such as hypertension and means by which they can prevent and manage this disease [6]. In fact public health has often had the challenging task of using the media to influence health practices while countering this same influence where it encourages unhealthy choices. These issues are especially important in a disease such as hypertension.

The turn of the 21st century was marked by concerns over the public health burden of hypertension globally [7]. Hypertension is undoubtedly one of the most challenging health problems of the 21st century [7,8]. Hypertension is commonly referred to as high blood pressure (HBP). It is a condition that occurs as a result of repeatedly elevated blood pressure exceeding 140 over 90 mmHg [10]. The World Health Organization uses a cut off of 140/90 mmHg as a measure of normal blood pressure. It has been called a silent killer as it usually manifests without symptoms. Hypertension takes a long time before diagnosed thereby causing major health problems as stroke and other

cardiovascular diseases [7,8]. Damage to organs as the brain, heart, kidneys and eye and so on are the long term effect of high blood pressure disease [9].

The World Health Organization report on hypertension estimated that chronic diseases accounted for 24% of all deaths in Nigeria in 2005 and that over the next 10 years; death from chronic diseases will increase by 24% [10]. Hypertension when left uncontrolled substantially increase the risk of cardiovascular and renal disease like stroke, coronary artery disease, heart failure and end stage renal disease [10]. The World Health statistics projects non-communicable diseases to be responsible for the estimated 57 million global deaths in 2008 [11]. World Heart Federation asserts that hypertension is the leading cause of cardiovascular disease worldwide and contributes about 50 percent of all cardiovascular diseases [12]. Furthermore, the world health organization report show that cardiovascular diseases accounts for approximately 17 million deaths a year, nearly one third of the total. Of these, complications of hypertension account for 9.4 million deaths world wide every year [13]. Only 40 percent of the population are aware of their status and less than 5 percent are controlled globally [10,13]. The prevalence of Hypertension was highest among African at 46% of adults aged 25 and above, while the lowest prevalence of 35% occurs among Americans [13]. Globally, Hypertension is responsible for at least 45% of deaths due to heart disease and 51% of deaths due to stroke [13]. This suggests that more people are affected as a result of the fact that more people live in low-income countries.

Nigeria is one of the countries that face the greatest burden of hypertension. According to the Nigeria Medical Association, the number of Nigerians living with high blood pressure is estimated at about 56 million, even as the World Health Organization calls for intensified efforts to prevent and control hypertension [14]. The prevalence level of hypertension in Nigeria is attributable to physical inactivity, alcohol consumption, education level and socio-economic factors [7]. The prevalence differs according to gender and locality [7,8]. Above all, non-adherence to treatment is one of the factors fueling the burden of hypertension in Nigeria.

The reasons for non-adherence to Hypertension treatment are complex and include; silent nature of hypertension, ambivalence about taking drugs,

concerns over side effects and complexity of treatment regimen [15]. To address the menace, World Health Organization brief on hypertension makes a case for intensified use of media campaign to sensitize the public on hypertension [13].

In the event of any threat, the mass media are always at the forefront of reporting issues in the society. The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about [16]. Over the years, hypertension has emerged as one of the most dreaded health risks ravaging humanity. Despite attempts by World Hypertension League (WHL), Nigerian Hypertension Society (NHS) and World Health Organization (WHO) which includes the annual commemoration of world Hypertension day every 17th May, there still remains the question as to the level to which various media have gone to enlighten the audience on the prevention and management of hypertension. The issue of concern is whether Nigerian Newspapers are living up to responsibilities in line with the media framing theory. The media framing influences the audience on how to think about issues, particularly issues of importance. Media frames can have significant consequences on how audience perceive and understand issues and can alter public opinions on ambivalent and important matters [17].

It is unclear the magnitude of coverage the press gives to hypertension in Nigeria. Considering the responsibilities expected of the media towards creating awareness on hypertension- causes, prevention and control- the question here is whether the newspapers give much attention to stories related to the disease and the significance or prominence attached to the coverage of the disease. This study therefore examines the direction, magnitude of coverage and regularity of coverage the newspapers give to hypertension in Nigeria.

2. METHODS

Coverage of hypertension in three Nigerian newspapers between 2011 and 2013 was done using article counts, space, location, story type and source. Three Nigerian daily newspapers- Guardian, This Day and Vanguard- published within study period were selected for the study. These three newspapers were selected randomly through balloting from twelve (12) high circulation and widely diffused newspapers in the country.

The month of May, for the three-year period, was chosen so as ensure adequate coverage, bearing in mind the fact that the world marks the annual global hypertension day, on the 17th of every May. The three year period is necessary, in order to evaluate the level of improvement or otherwise, in the reportage of the illness. The data were summarized using proportion and percentages. They were presented in tables. The code sheet for analysis groups the contents into units to guide the researchers in collecting data. It further divides the contents into media:

Media: Guardian, This Day, Vanguard

Story Type: News, Editorials, Features/ Opinion Articles, Public service announcement, Letters-to-the- editor/Special Reports

Length of stories: 1-15 inches, 16- 30 inches, 31-45 inches, 46-one page, above one page

Story placement: Front page, Inside page, Back page

Illustrations: Illustrated, Not illustrated

Source: Staff, Non staff, Unidentified

Difference in coverage over period of study: 2011, 2012, 2013

3. RESULTS

Table 1 indicates that there were 48 (47.5%) opinion/ feature stories, 39 (38.6%) straight news stories, 6 (5.9%) public service announcement, and 8 (7.9%) interviews and there were no editorials or letters to the editor. Result also shows that 86 (85.1%) stories were covered by staff while 12 (11.9%) stories were covered by non- staff.

Table 2 indicates that the newspapers carried no stories on the front and back pages and 101 (100%) stories in the inside pages. Also it is shown that 88 (87.1%) were illustrated while 13 stories representing 12.9% were not illustrated.

Table 3 shows that 27 stories representing 26.7% and 32 (31.7%) stories were written in 1-15 inches and 16-30 inches respectively. There were 31 (30.7%) stories in the group of 31-45 inches while 46 inches to1 page had 11 (10.9%) stories. It equally shows that in 2011, the newspapers carried 27 (26.7%) stories, 33 (32.6%) stories in 2012, and 41 (40.6%) stories in 2013.

Table 1. Types of stories covered and sources of the stories

	Guardian n=33	This day n=37	Vanguard n=31	Total N=101	Percent
Story type					
Opinion/feature	17	13	18	48	47.5
Straight news	14	20	5	39	38.6
Public service announcement	2	4	0	6	5.9
Editorial	0	0	0	0	0.0
Interview	0	0	8	8	7.9
Source					
Staff	27	29	30	86	85.1
Non- staff	6	5	1	12	11.9
Unidentified	0	3	0	3	3.0

Table 2. Placement and source of the stories

	Guardian n=33	This day n=37	Vanguard n=31	Total N=101	Percent
Placement					
Front page	0	0	0	0	0.0
Inside page	33	37	31	101	100.0
Back page	0	0	0	0	0.0
Source					
Illustrated	25	33	30	88	87.1
Not illustrated	8	4	1	13	12.9

Table 3. Length of stories and coverage by the three newspapers over the selected years

	Guardian n=33	This Day n=37	Vanguard n=31	Total N=101	Percent
Length					
1-5 inches	8	17	2	27	26.7
16-30 inches	12	9	11	32	31.7
31-45inches	11	5	15	31	30.7
46 inches-one page	2	6	3	11	10.9
Above one page	-	-	-	-	-
Year					
2011	8	10	9	27	26.7
2012	11	12	10	33	32.6
2013	14	15	12	41	40.6

Table 4. Frequency of coverage according to newspapers

Stories	Guardian n(%)	This day n(%)	Vanguard n(%)	Total n(%)
Total no of stories	10,750 (37.1)	8,556 (29.5)	9,686 (33.5)	28,992(100.0)
Stories on hypertension	33 (32.7)	37 (36.6)	31 (30.7)	101(100.0)
% coverage on hypertension	0.31	0.43	0.32	0.34

Out of 28992 stories the newspapers had in the period studied, 101 stories were on hypertension. This number (101) represents 0.34% of the total stories.

4. DISCUSSION

The study showed that coverage of stories on hypertension is such that 26.7% of the 110 articles we identified on hypertension were published in 2011 and 40.6% in 2013. The newspapers made sure they carried issues on hypertension every World hypertension day thereby recognizing the importance of the disease and the dangers it causes to the society. However, much still need to be done on newspaper coverage considering the danger posed by hypertension. It is not enough to cover an issue as important as hypertension on that day only but there should be a constant reminder to the people about this disease.

It is through editorials, the 'assumed' voice of the newspaper, that the paper uses to explain its stand on topical issues. These help readers to reach informed opinions. Neglecting this fact means that the newspaper will leave the reader unguided. The Guardian, This Day and Vanguard newspapers ignored the importance of editorials in their coverage of hypertension during the selected period of study. The selected newspapers had more feature/opinion and straight news stories, a few public service announcements and interviews but it carried no

editorial on the issue. This is not impressive considering that it is through editorials that newspapers make their stand on an issue known. In line with the framing theory where the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning so as to have effect on the audience's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors by connecting a particular meaning or interpretation to that issue, this research discovered that the press did not give enough attention to hypertension that would have attracted its audience to that issue.

This agrees with the finding of a study which asserts that editorials are said to be the authoritative voice of media organizations but in this study it was discovered that little attention was paid to editorials which could have been an avenue for the media to take a stand on hypertension [4]. Findings is unlike that in a study which noted that press coverage of Jos crisis had more straight news stories, which implies that newspapers report the issues just as they occur, and do not give an elaborate analysis of the reports in the form of features [18]. Equally it does not align with the finding of another study which found out that newspapers had more editorial stories on health issues [3]. According to the report from the study, a health editorial urges people to take part in a public awareness programme. As a result, it is through such means that the objectives of the framing theory which is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an

influence on how it is understood by the audience [3]. The media framing influences the audience on how to think about issues, particularly issues of importance such as hypertension. If the press consistently frames hypertension in a particular light, the attention of the audience will be drawn to the need to pay attention to it.

This research discovered that stories on hypertension were not given prominence, coverage of important health issues such as hypertension deserves front page placement. The result of this research shows that the newspaper did not give front page placement to stories on hypertension even on world hypertension day. Also, no story on hypertension was given back page placement either, all the stories were located on the inside page of the selected newspapers. This finding agrees with the findings of a similar study in the area of quantity of story placement when they studied press coverage of Niger-Delta crisis [unpublished observation].

In terms of frequency, the number of stories on hypertension was very minimal when compared to the total number of stories in the selected newspapers. Hypertension is a deadly disease and more deadly because majority of people are not aware of the extent of damage it can cause. Despite its consequences, the newspapers preferred to give more coverage to other issues like politics, crime, sports and economy. These issues especially politics seem the most preferred because of the presence of conflict; A report supports this assertion that “the health beat is not particularly high news yielding beat like politics or the economy” [3]. The African Woman and Child Feature Service report on the “Media Coverage of HIV/AIDS and Health Issues in Africa: Needs Assessment in Kenya” also confirms this assertion that “there is an undue emphasis on political stories and this cause less coverage of development messages like health.”

5. CONCLUSION

Even though the Newspapers have made effort in the coverage of hypertension, the disease has not been given the prominence and significance it deserves to show its importance and the damages neglect of this disease can cause. The newspapers were committed to the coverage of hypertension as majority of the stories were covered by the staff. The press did not give prominence to stories on hypertension as there

were no editorials on the disease. The coverage of issues on hypertension was not frequent as it occurred only on or around remembrance days.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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