

Bridging the Gap: Public Health Strategies for Overcoming Cultural Barriers in Cancer Treatment among Eastern Nigerian Patients

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ABSTRACT

Cancer remains a significant public health challenge in Eastern Nigeria, with cultural beliefs and societal norms playing a central role in shaping individuals' health-seeking behaviors. Despite advancements in cancer treatment, cultural barriers, such as reliance on traditional medicine, religious beliefs, and fear of stigma, contribute to delays in diagnosis and treatment, exacerbating cancer-related morbidity and mortality. This review examines the cultural perceptions that influence cancer care in Eastern Nigeria, including the impact of traditional healing practices, spiritual beliefs, and misconceptions surrounding cancer. It explores public health strategies aimed at overcoming these cultural barriers, emphasizing community engagement, educational campaigns, faith-based interventions, integration of traditional and modern medicine, and policy reforms. Case studies from Eastern Nigeria, such as faith-based cancer awareness programs and multisectoral collaborations, highlight successful interventions in bridging cultural gaps and improving cancer care access. By incorporating culturally sensitive strategies into cancer treatment and prevention efforts, this study advocates for an integrated approach that respects local traditions while promoting evidence-based healthcare to reduce the burden of cancer in Eastern Nigeria.

Keywords: Cancer treatment, cultural barriers, Eastern Nigeria, traditional medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Cancer is a major public health challenge worldwide, with an increasing burden in low- and middle-income countries, including Nigeria [1]. The rising incidence of cancer in Nigeria has become a source of concern for healthcare professionals and policymakers. Despite advancements in cancer diagnosis and treatment, a significant proportion of Nigerian patients seek medical attention only when the disease has progressed to an advanced stage. This delay in seeking medical care is largely influenced by cultural beliefs, societal norms, and misconceptions about cancer and its treatment [2]. Understanding the role of cultural perceptions in shaping healthcare-seeking behavior is crucial for improving early detection and intervention efforts. This review aims to assess the impact of cultural perceptions on cancer care in Nigeria and explore strategic public health measures to address these barriers [3].

Cancer remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in Nigeria, with breast, cervical, prostate, and colorectal cancers being the most prevalent [4]. According to the Global Cancer Observatory, Nigeria recorded an estimated 124,815 new cancer cases and 78,899 cancer-related deaths in 2020 [5]. The high mortality rate is attributed to late-stage diagnosis, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and limited awareness about early detection and treatment options [6]. Cultural beliefs and traditional health practices play a significant role in influencing how individuals perceive and respond to cancer symptoms. In many Nigerian communities, cancer is often associated with spiritual afflictions, ancestral curses, or supernatural forces, leading individuals to seek alternative treatments such as herbal remedies, spiritual healing, or traditional medicine instead of conventional medical care [7]. Additionally, fear of stigmatization, fatalistic attitudes, and misinformation contribute to delays in seeking professional medical help. Addressing these cultural barriers requires a multifaceted approach that integrates community engagement, education, and policy-driven interventions [8].

Despite the increasing burden of cancer in Nigeria, early diagnosis and timely medical intervention remain a challenge. Cultural barriers significantly impact cancer awareness, screening behaviors, and treatment adherence [9]. Many individuals view cancer as a death sentence, leading to reluctance in seeking medical attention. Traditional healing methods, religious beliefs, and myths about cancer treatment further contribute to delayed diagnosis. Moreover, stigma associated with cancer can result in social isolation, discrimination, and psychological

distress, discouraging individuals from undergoing necessary medical evaluations [10]. The lack of culturally tailored public health interventions has exacerbated the situation, leaving many cancer patients with limited options for timely care. This study seeks to analyze the cultural factors influencing cancer care in Nigeria and propose effective strategies for overcoming these barriers [11]. This study aims to identify cultural beliefs and perceptions that influence cancer awareness, screening, and treatment-seeking behavior in Nigeria. It evaluates the impact of traditional medicine and alternative healing practices on cancer diagnosis and treatment outcomes, and examines the role of stigma, fear, and misinformation in delaying cancer diagnosis and treatment. The study explores the effectiveness of existing public health interventions in promoting early cancer detection and treatment, and recommends culturally sensitive strategies for improving cancer awareness, screening, and treatment accessibility in Nigeria. The study provides valuable insights into cultural barriers that hinder early cancer diagnosis and treatment in Nigeria, highlighting the role of traditional medicine and alternative healing practices in shaping perceptions of cancer. It offers recommendations for integrating culturally relevant health education into public health initiatives and advocating for culturally inclusive approaches that bridge the gap between traditional beliefs and modern medical practices. By bridging the gap between cultural beliefs and evidence-based medical care, Nigeria can improve its cancer care framework and provide better outcomes for individuals affected by this disease.

Cultural Barriers to Cancer Treatment in Eastern Nigeria

Cultural barriers to cancer treatment in Eastern Nigeria are significant, affecting individuals' health-seeking behaviors and potentially leading to delayed early diagnosis and reduced adherence to conventional treatments [12]. Traditional medicine and herbal remedies are often the first point of contact for patients experiencing symptoms of illness, including cancer. These traditional remedies are deeply rooted in cultural identity and belief systems, and patients may delay seeking biomedical treatment in favor of herbs, roots, and spiritual interventions. Religion plays a dominant role in healthcare decision-making in Eastern Nigeria, with many people believing that illnesses, including cancer, have spiritual origins and can only be cured through faith-based interventions [13]. This faith-based approach can lead to delays in diagnosis and treatment, increasing the risk of poor outcomes. Cancer is often associated with negative social stigma, leading to social isolation, discrimination, and rejection by family members. Family and community influence can also play a critical role in whether a patient seeks hospital-based treatment or follows traditional healing methods [14]. Financial concerns, skepticism toward modern healthcare, and the belief that traditional healers are more effective can discourage medical interventions. Mistrust in modern healthcare is prevailing due to past negative experiences, perceived inefficacy of treatments, and high medical costs. Many patients turn to alternative medicine, which is often seen as more affordable and culturally familiar. Addressing cultural barriers to cancer treatment in Eastern Nigeria requires a multi-faceted approach, including public health education campaigns, integrating traditional healers into the healthcare system, and engaging religious and community leaders in advocacy efforts [15].

Public Health Strategies to Overcome Cultural Barriers

Overcoming cultural barriers to cancer treatment in Eastern Nigeria requires a comprehensive public health approach that includes education, healthcare system strengthening, stigma reduction, and policy interventions [16]. Key strategies include community engagement and education, school and faith-based programs, integrating traditional and modern medicine, improving cancer screening programs, financial support and insurance schemes, patient advocacy and support groups, engaging media and social platforms, and policy and government interventions. Community-based awareness campaigns can be effective in addressing cultural barriers by using respected community influencers such as local chiefs, traditional healers, and village elders to disseminate accurate information about cancer [17]. Schools should introduce basic lessons on cancer prevention, early symptoms, and treatment options, while faith-based organizations can educate their congregations about the importance of early cancer detection. Religious leaders should promote medically approved treatment instead of solely relying on faith healing. Strengthening healthcare systems and accessibility can be achieved through the integration of traditional and modern medicine, training programs to educate traditional healers about cancer symptoms and the benefits of early hospital treatment, and establishing regional cancer screening centers in government hospitals. Financial support mechanisms such as subsidized chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and surgery for low-income patients and health insurance schemes should be introduced to ensure that financial constraints do not prevent patients from seeking care. Public-private partnerships can also help mobilize funds to make cancer treatment more affordable and accessible [18].

Patient advocacy and support groups can play a crucial role in changing social perceptions about the disease. Establishing cancer advocacy groups where survivors share their experiences can help normalize conversations around cancer and encourage open discussions about cancer within families and communities [19]. Media plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions, with television programs, radio shows, and social media campaigns being leveraged to challenge cancer-related myths and highlight success stories of early detection and treatment. Documentaries and talk shows featuring medical professionals, survivors, and cultural leaders can help dispel fears and misinformation. Policy and government interventions are essential for ensuring that cancer treatment is

accessible and prioritized. The government should mandate regular cancer screening programs and subsidized treatment options through national health policies, enforce guidelines that promote evidence-based cancer treatment, and train healthcare providers in cultural competency to improve patient trust and adherence to treatment [20]. By respecting and acknowledging patients' cultural backgrounds, healthcare workers can foster better doctor-patient relationships and encourage positive health-seeking behavior. Overcoming cultural barriers to cancer treatment in Eastern Nigeria requires a multi-pronged approach that includes education, improved healthcare accessibility, stigma reduction, and government intervention [21]. By engaging communities, integrating traditional and modern medicine, improving financial support, leveraging media platforms, and strengthening policies, public health efforts can significantly improve cancer care uptake.

Case Studies and Successful Interventions

Case studies in Eastern Nigeria have shown that targeted strategies can bridge cultural gaps and improve cancer care access. These strategies include community-based, faith-driven, and multisectoral approaches. Community health workers (CHWs) have played a vital role in promoting cancer awareness and early detection in underserved areas, reducing cultural resistance to medical treatment [22]. Faith-based health interventions have been successful in collaborating with medical professionals to encourage evidence-based cancer treatment while respecting cultural and religious beliefs. In Anambra State, a Catholic diocese partnered with local hospitals to implement a faith-based cancer awareness program, involving pastors and priests educating congregants about early cancer detection during church services. This led to increased acceptance of medical interventions, reduced stigma associated with cancer, and strengthened the healthcare referral system. Multisectoral collaborations have also been successful in addressing cultural barriers to cancer treatment, with a successful multisectoral initiative in Enugu State involving the state government, NGOs, and traditional leaders [23]. This case demonstrated that a collective approach leveraging cultural influencers, healthcare resources, and policy backing could create a sustainable impact in bridging healthcare gaps. By expanding these interventions and adapting them to different cultural contexts, more significant progress can be made in reducing cancer-related morbidity and mortality in Eastern Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The review emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and culturally sensitive public health approach to address cultural barriers to cancer treatment in Eastern Nigeria. Traditional beliefs, religious influences, stigma, and mistrust in modern healthcare contribute to delays in diagnosis and treatment, leading to high mortality rates and worsening disparities in access to care. Integrating culturally relevant public health strategies, such as community-based education, faith-based interventions, and multisectoral collaborations, can improve early detection, treatment adherence, and overall cancer survival rates in the region. Programs that engage traditional healers, incorporate faith-based teachings, and strengthen healthcare infrastructure can enhance trust in medical systems and encourage timely healthcare-seeking behavior. Financial support mechanisms and improved accessibility to cancer care services are critical in ensuring cultural and socioeconomic barriers do not prevent individuals from receiving life-saving treatment. A multi-pronged approach that integrates local customs with evidence-based medicine is essential for fostering a shift in perceptions about cancer care.

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