

## Mass Media Reportage of Lassa Fever Disease in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study considers and expresses opinion on mass media reportage of Lassa fever disease in Nigeria. The widespread reportage and the persistence of Lassa fever infection and fatality in Nigeria necessitate this opinion. The media reportage of the virus is limited in its content, poor network connection, timing of the broadcast and people's indifference. These combined elements have posed a hindrance to pro-Lassa fever health, environmental behaviours and increased Lassa fever cases, since, 2005.

### INTRODUCTION

This study discusses mass media reportage of Lassa fever disease in Nigeria. The mass media appears to be providing pseudo and highly defective information about Lassa fever and its outbreak in Nigeria which are impeding the pro-Lassa fever health and environmental behaviours and Lassa fever cases control, since, 2005. There was an outbreak of Lassa fever between 2005 and 2016 which caused many fatalities. The outbreak Lassa fever have been recorded in many states in Nigeria, including Kano, Nassarawa, Plateau, Kebbi, Benue, Edo, Oyo, Ogun, Abuja, Ebonyi and Anambra and Imo<sup>[1-3]</sup>. The fever infected about 5051 people and about 3891 people died, including doctors and nurses<sup>[3]</sup>. Lassa fever disease is lethal to pregnancy women. It causes fetal or maternal death in over 80% of cases in the third trimester<sup>[4]</sup>.

The high fatality rate from outbreaks of Lassa fever is caused by the prevalence of certain unhealthy behaviours sanitary and environmental that increase the risk of Lassa fever among Nigerians. For example, people (particularly children) living in rural areas eat rodents which are the primary carriers of Lassa fever disease<sup>[5]</sup>. Also, the majority of the Nigerian population reside in township swamps and ghettos and in rural areas with poor

hygienic environments which provide a fertile breeding ground for rodents. Human contacts with the droppings of these rodents and/or human food wastes that these rodents usually scavenge on and eating of poorly covered food which may have been urinated upon or eaten in part by these rodents are channels of Lassa fever infections<sup>[6]</sup>.

The Nigerian media focused on the latest outbreak of Lassa fever in many states of the country. Government at all levels, non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations, radio stations, newspapers and television stations used the social media to complement traditional methods of disseminating information to create awareness, sensitise and mobilise the populace against the spread of the disease<sup>[7]</sup>. There were news flashes, breaking news, newspaper headlines and media commentaries on the epidemic across the entire national and regional dailies, radio and television stations<sup>[8, 9]</sup>. While these may seem to be positive, the efforts were not successful.

The media reporting of the outbreak was unsuccessful for several reasons. The scope of the coverage was limited and missing detailed information about the nature, symptoms, method of transmission and carrier, preventive health behaviour activities, treatment

measures and centres, vaccines and management mechanism for infected patient. The approach created a pseudo knowledge and awareness of the disease among many Nigerians. Many Nigerians, such as people living in the rural populace in the Ijebu North Local Government area of Ogun state are said to not be aware that rodents are vectors of Lassa fever, yet media sensitisation is on-going<sup>[10, 11]</sup>. Inappropriate structuring and timing of radio and television programmes hindered pro-Lassa fever health and environmental behaviour in Nigeria. These were complemented by the problems of unreliable power supply which prevents over 70% Nigerians living below poverty line from consuming media programmes; non-reception of network; English as language of communication and people's indifference to media programme because they perceive them as government propaganda machine.

### CONCLUSION

The mass media reporting of the latest outbreak of Lassa fever in Nigeria reveals that Lassa fever is a serious public health issue in the country. The prevalence of pro-Lassa fever health and environmental behaviours among Nigerians are the cause of high fatality rate recorded in the outbreak. The mass media can play positive role in combating the Lassa fever pandemics and its attendant fatality in Nigeria. However, mass media activities are unsuccessful because they ignore essential information relating to the pandemic. Information gaps, along with lack of timely and appropriate information impede the pro-Lassa fever health and environmental behaviours.

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