

Bridging Communication Gap between Patients and Health Workers in Nigeria: Analysis of Functions of Public Relations in Some Selected Hospitals in Abakaliki Metropolis

ILANG, CHUKWUMA ITESHI

Department of Mass Communication, Ebonyi State University Abakaliki, Nigeria;

&

IKELLE, ADA PRECIOUS

Department of Mass Communication, Ebonyi State University Abakaliki, Nigeria;

ABSTRACT: A proper attitude and good communication skills are some of the essential skills needed in health institution. The bad characters of some health workers in Nigeria hospital cannot be swept under the carpet. The researchers analyzed on bridging communication gap between patients and health workers in Nigeria, and functions of public relation in two hospitals in Abakaliki metropolis; Alex Ekwueme Federal University Teaching Hospital and Mile Four Hospital. A descriptive survey method was used. A sample size of 197 respondents was purposively selected and copies of questionnaire were administered to them. Findings from the study revealed that; the levels of communication and relations between the patients and the health workers in the selected hospitals in Abakaliki metropolis were very poor. It also revealed that there is no effective use of public relations in solving patients' communication problems in the selected hospital, and lack of good communication has caused a lot of damages to the patients admitted in the hospitals. The study recommends that patients should be handled with care and there should be functional public relations units in all the hospitals in Nigeria. It also recommends that Information and communication skills should be added into the curriculum of health education in Nigeria.

Key words: Communication Gap, Patients, Public Relations, Hospital and Health Workers

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I. INTRODUCTION

The discrimination between patients and health workers in Nigeria has become a source of attention for the media who stand as a voice of the voiceless. Communication is a process of sharing meanings, ideas, information and feelings. According to Obe, (2008) opines that "communication is a common phenomenon that cut across the daily activities of human beings" He further stated thus "As food and water are very important to man's survival, so is communication". Health communication is a process or practicing of sharing ideas that prompt health information. Health communication is a study and practice of communicating promotional health campaign, Wikipedia (2019). The term health communication came up when the members of International Communication Association, Interest Group adopted the form. The communication gap between the health workers is identified as interpersonal form of communication problem. This is a type of communication that involves two people: the sender and the receiver only. Communication gap is a barrier that has been identified as a problem that patients suffer as a result of neglects, poor communication and rejection by the health workers. Health communication barrier is a situation where there is no mutual relationship between the health workers and the patients.

1.1.1 Communication Gap: This concept will be used interchangeably with communication barrier. Communication barrier is a process of no flow of information from the sender to the receiver. Communication barrier is anything that prevent one from receiving and understanding the message others used to convey ideas, information and thought; Usha (2016). According to Faisal (2018), communication gap is when meaning intended by the speaker or sender is not well understood by the recipient. He believed that many things can caused communication gap thus, fear, mistrust, body language and maintaining an attitude of other disgust or hatred and channel of communication. In this context, communication gap is situation whereby patients do not have a good communication with the health providers in the hospitals

1.1.2 Patients: Oxford advanced learner dictionary defined patient as person who is receiving medical treatment, especially in the hospital. The word patient originated from the Latin word "Patiens" meaning "I am suffering". A patient is any recipient of health care service. (Wikipedia, 2019). According to Wikipedia, there

are two types of patients: Outpatient and Inpatient. Outpatient are those patient hospitalize for less than 24hrs while the inpatient is a patient who is using the full range of services of a hospital or clinic. Patients are sick people who are receiving health care from the health care providers in hospitals. World Health Organization (WHO), Define patients as a person who is the recipient of health care (WHO, 2011).

1.1.3 Public Relations: According to the British Institute of Public Relations defines public relation is a deliberation planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and it public. Though the definition is clear to understand the public relation is organized and contains activity with orderly manner. It is done to build up absolute and mutual understanding between the organization and the public. Public relation perform the function of Management in an identified organization that build steady good relationship between the organization and it public in order to protect its image. According to Jefkin (1992) as cited in Onyiengo, (2014), public relations consist of all forms of planned communication outward and inward between organization and its public for the purpose of achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding.

1.1.4 Health workers: These are the people that are trained to offer medical treatment in health institution. According to WHO, Health workers are people whose job it is to protect and improve the health of their community. In the words of Joseph and et al, (2016) they define health worker as a “one who delivers care and services to the sick and ailing either directly as doctors or nurses or indirectly as aid, helpers, laboratory technicians or even waste handlers”

1.2 Statement of the Problems

Due to the communication gap, most times patients are not properly informed of their health conditions. Studies have shown that there have been a law cases due to inadequate or completely communication gaps as a result of poor sharing of important information to patients.

The Nigerian health workers have been accused of condemnation of many lives through neglect and rejection of their patients, studies have also shown that doctors and nurses reject patients who have strange signs and symptoms of sickness. This anomaly is clear evidence that health workers do not care about their patients and as such the relationship between them has a big gap. Parents of patients are denied of information concern their relation, health condition. The top citizens have decided to take health tourism in abroad where proper care will be given to them. The ability of a Doctor to diagnose and counsel patients properly, a good communication relationship must be esterblish for effective health care. According to Longnecker (2010) as cited in Nwabueze and Nwankwo 2016:54) state thus:

An effective doctor – patients communication is determined by the doctor's beside 'manner' which patient often judge as an important indicator of the doctor's general competence. A good doctor – patient communication has the potential to help regulate patients' emotions, facilitation, and allow for a better identification of patient,. Good health communication is a drug that heals without side effect.

The interpersonal barrier between health workers and patients has caused many loss of lives in Nigeria hospitals. The role of communication in health cannot be overemphasize. when there is a need to settle a health challenge, patient tent to feel more relaxed, (Nwabueze and Nwankwo, 2016). It is identified that most of the diagnosis in the hospital is through interview. The personal interview is a channel through which doctors gather information, developing and maintaining a therapeutic relationship.

Oyebola (2018) opines that health training institutions do not include communication skill in the curriculum; he said thus “most medical and nursing curriculum for years do not include communication skills”. The adage that you cannot give what you do not have, is a clear indication that they did not receive proper communication skill training. As such many health providers are not competent enough to communicate. However, there is need that patients should be able to send information to the doctor or other health professionals and receive advice, remind and alert from the patients (Paul and David, 2005). The faith of patient grows when there is mutual relationship with the nurses and doctors. “The patient will never care how much you know until they know how much you care” -Terry Canale as cited in Veta health (2018).

Public relations officers have big roles to play to curb these anomalies. The information officers in the hospitals should not have focused only in protecting the image of the hospital but stand as mediator to the patients of the hospitals: public relation officers have a lot of functions to play in protecting patients' image in the hospitals. These include:

To maintain good relationship with community

To ensure that patients receive proper attention and care from the doctors and nurses.

To help communication flow between health workers and patients, etc.

The public relations officer stand to intervene in emerging cases mostly identification of the accident victims and possible claiming. The situation in Nigeria, do we actually have public relation officer in the public hospitals who can stand to perform the selfless services to the masses? Many Nigeria patients have been quarantined due to inability to pay hospital bills. Public relation is a very vital tools that are useful in all aspect of life. Health institution is a very important area of social activity. This has brought a lot of critic to their activities to know the level of services to humanity (zoran et al, 2010). The problem of communication gap has been attributed to the neglect of management of hospital and doctors over public relation officers as part of management function. this has caused a lot of challenges to the patients. Doctors have been attributed to the stereotype that they are people who have extremely low ability of good and effective communication with it public (zoran et al, 2010). According to them management do not have good idea to recruit communication professionals in their institution. Studies have shown that management of hospitals do not employ Public Relations Officer (PRO) for the protection of patients but for the hospital management and manage protection. This problem has belittled the function of PRO in the health institution thereby causing big damages to the health institutions.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to bridge the communication gap between patients and health workers in Nigeria health institutions, to identify the effective uses and functions of public relations in fight against communication problems in Nigeria hospitals. Specifically, the following formed the specific objectives of the study:

1. To ascertain the levels of communication and relations between the patients and the health workers in the selected hospitals in Abakaliki Metropolis
2. To find out if the selected hospitals uses public relations effectively in solving patients communication problems.
3. To know the levels of damages communication gap has caused to the patients of the selected hospitals in Abakaliki Metropolis.
4. To identify if the patients have good knowledge of the functions of public relations in health institutions

1.4 Research Questions

The research question is formulated to bring out a reasonable reactions of the respondents that will help to achieve the objective of the study. The following were the formulated research questions:

1. Are the levels of communication and relations between patients and health workers in the selected hospitals in Abakaliki Metropolis good?
2. Have the selected hospitals use public relations effectively in solving patients' communication problems?
3. Have the patients of the selected hospitals suffered high levels of damages?
4. Do the patients of the selected hospitals have good knowledge of the functions public relations?

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The researchers extensively reviewed relevant idea of scholars on the challenges of patients in communication barrier, the functions of public relations in Nigerian health institution.

Conceptual review: The challenges of patients in Nigeria have attracted the attention of many scholars local and international. The communication problems have been a source of problem to sick ones. According to Lee (2003) as cited in Nwabueze and Nwankwo (2016) without effective use of language, the physicians and patients relationship will seriously be impaired. This is in line with Street et al (2008) when they identify four major communication related factors that might course negative outcomes of patients-doctors relations. These factors include: misunderstanding, low satisfactory and reduced complain. In their observation these factors affects patients out comes either directly or indirectly. Nwabueze and nwankwo(2016) opined that the aims of establishing hospitals is patients. However, anybody can be a patients any time any day. The health workers are not free from sickness. According to Fong et al (2010) as cited in Thanny et al (2013) they identified many barriers to good communication in the doctor-patients relations these include; patients' anxiety and fear, doctor burden of work, fear of litigation, fear of verbal abuse, and unrealistic patients expectations.

The functions of public relations in hospitals, in the study of Nikky(2009) she identified the skills of public relations in hospital to include:

- *Understanding the patients confidentiality and privacy act*
- ability to communicate thoughts and ideas effectively and accurately*
- knowledge of the community and health care administration*
- analytical and problem solving ability*
- Knowing the hospital structure, department and support group familiar with the community where the hospital is located and Writing skill and ability to handle different types of media*

In the view of Regidor (2007) as cited in Hilmi and Emenyeonu (2014), the goal of public relations in health institution is to communicate and disseminate health information in a way that it can be interpreted by the individual and the society. It is only when the public relations officers function effectively that they can be considered usefully and excellent to the achievement of the organizational goals and objectives, (Dozier,1992). The practice of public relations in the health care, has changed together with the dramatic changes in health care, (Zoran,2010). However if health sectors should effectively use public relations, there will be a positive change in Nigeria health institutions. In the study of Nwafor (2019) on the evolution of public relations, Edward Bernays put elements of public relations as: informing, persuading, integrating people to people.

2.2 Empirical Review

Tanny, Akhagba and Keshinro (2013) carried out a study on *Patients Perception of Communicative Behavior of Caregivers in Lagos Public Hospital*. The study was aimed at patients views on the communicative behaviour of the caregivers in the selected hospitals in Lagos state. The researchers discovered that adequate attitude and communicative skills are among the essential objective in the health care sector. Other findings made were patients in government hospitals do not perceive the medical care gives in public hospital has been communicative and responsive to their emotions but they were perceived as being competent. The researchers recommend that medical care givers should be trained in the area of interpersonal communication.

Hilmi and Emenyeonu (2014), in their research titled “*The Role of Public Relations in Hospital; Toward a Successful Health Care Delivery System in Oman*”. The study emphasized a holistic thought of the functions of public relations in the dissemination of information in hospital in Oman. The study found that public relations practice in Oman is not standard . The study also revealed that the use of information technology in the dissemination of health information is not in pace with the rapid development in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector. The studies recommend that public relations department should actively involved in well formulated and standard public relations functions.

Nwabueze and nwankwo (2016) also researched on the topic: *Ethnicity and Doctor –Patients Communication; An Exploratory Study of University of Abuja Teaching hospital, Nigeria*. The researchers adopted a survey research method in the study. They aimed to find out if language has a factor in determining respondents interpersonal communication in relationship with doctors. The study revealed that when a doctor is of a different ethnic background , this affect patients relationship with the doctors. The researchers recommend that Nigerian hospitals should consider way of pairing physicians and patients of similar ethnic backgrounds to foster greater communication.

The summary of the review shows that there is a big gap in solving the problems of communication in health institutions.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the “Agenda Setting Theory”. The theory states that “while the mass media may not be powerful enough to determine for us what and how we actually think they are obviously influenced in determining what we think about at a particular time. They predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time is the mass media that determine the issues that regarded as an important at a given time in a given society.

According to NOUN (2010), the origin of the agenda setting theory is traced to 1922, when Watter Lippman showed concern on the importance function mass media can do in influencing the public mind. (Lippman, 1922 as cited in Nor Razinal, 2014). The believe that media have big role of exposing a silent issues for public awareness and possible solution to it is not a doubt.

The condition of Nigeria patients cannot be swept under the compact. According to Nor (2014), Agenda Setting Theory is a theory that discusses on how the mass media influences in making other issues a public agenda, in his opinion agenda is a the members of the public concern. It is based on good relation to solve this public issue, that this study adopted Agenda setting theory as its anchor.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher adopted descriptive survey research. It involves application of primary and secondary data collection method of gathering required information for the study. The researchers sourced the primary data through structured questionnaire while the secondary were through local and international journals, books, blogs and other important materials for the study.

3.1 Population of the study

Population is the total aggregate of the data within the area of the study. It define the limit which the researchers’ findings are applicable. The population of this study is drawn from the record unit of Alex

Ekwueme Federal University Teaching Hospital (AE-FETHA) and Mile Four Hospital both in Abakaliki metropolis

AE-FETHA= 321 Patients,

Mile Four =83 patients and

Total 404

The population the researcher used is the total patients' record in the hospitals as at August, 2019.

3.2 Sample size

Sample is an element of the population that is selected to be used for the study. The sample size of the study was obtained through Wimmer and Dominck Mass Media Research Online Sample Size Calculator. The confidence level of the calculation was 95% with 5.0 margin error. The sample size of the study is one hundred and ninety seven (197)

3.3 Sample Technique

Sampling techniques is the specification of how element of the population are drawn from the entire population. The sample techniques adopted in this study is quota sampling. This is the type of sample techniques in which the researcher chooses his sample based on certain criterion like population density. In this study the researcher used quota based on the population of the patients in the two hospitals used.

3.4 Method of Data Collection

This study employed both primary and secondary data. The primary method provided the quantitative data that were analyzed statistical while the secondary data method provided a qualitative data that were used in literature review.

3.5 Instrument of Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collation. The questionnaire was designed to cover all the criteria that were necessary variable among the subject under study. A four point likert scale was provided and the respondents were required to rate.

Thus: stongly agree SA= 4point

Agree A=3 point

Disagree SD =2 point

Strongly disagree D=1 point

Therefore $4+3+2+1=10$

$10/4= 2.5$

3.6 Decision rule:

By the analysis, mean rate of 2.5 and above is accepted while 2.49 and below is rejected. The method data analysis used in this study is mean rating.

IV. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.2 Table one: research question one; Are the levels of communication and relations of between patients and health workers in the selected hospitals in Abakaliki Metropolis good?

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	FX	\bar{X}	DECISION
1	There is satisfaction with the level of relations and communication with the health workers in this hospital	7	25	90	75	358	1.81	Disagreed
2	There is no prompt attention when a health worker is called for help	95	71	11	20	635	3.22	Agreed
3	patients have died in the hospitals due poor communication and neglects	101	80	3	13	663	3.36	Agreed
4	Some health workers hardly communicate with patients in good manner	125	45	16	11	678	3.44	Agreed

Source: Field Survey 2019

The table one above answered research question one. Item one with mean rate of 1.81 the respondents disagreed that they were satisfied with level of communication they normally have with the health workers in the hospital they receive treatment . in item two the patients agreed that there is no prompt attention when health workers were called for help. Item 3 (3.36 mean rate) there is an indication that patients have died in hospitals due to poor communication and neglect. Item four with mean of 3.44 the patients said that health workers hardly communicate with patients in good manner.

4.3 Table Two: Research Question Two; Have the selected hospitals use public relations effectively in solving patients' communication problems?

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	FX	\bar{X}	DECISION
5	There is functional public relations unit in the hospital	5	11	143	38	377	1.91	Disagreed
6	There is no effective public relation officers for urgent attention	130	41	15	11	684	3.47	Agreed
7	There is no much regard of public relations function in the hospital	83	59	28	29	594	3.01	Agreed
8	Nurses and doctors do not pay regard to public relations officers	72	53	31	41	550	2.79	Agreed

Source: Field Survey 2019

Table two answered research question two. Item five (5) with 1.91 mean the respondents that there is functional public relation unit in the hospital they receive treatment . however, in item six the patients agreed that there is no effective public relations officers for urgent attentions. In item seven(7) with the mean of 3.01 the patients agreed that there is no much regard of the functions of public relations to the hospital. Item eight (8) with value mean rate of 2.79, it agreed that nurses and doctors do not pay regard to public relation officers in the hospital.

4.4 Table three: research question three; have the patients of the selected hospitals suffered high levels of damages?

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	FX	\bar{X}	DECISION
9	Patients have suffered rejections and neglects	90	75	21	11	638	3.23	Agreed
10	Life have lost because of neglects in hospital	79	87	24	7	632	3.20	Agreed
11	Patients have been abandoned in the hospital because of strange signs and symptoms	120	59	18	0	693	3.51	Agreed

Source: Field Survey 2019

Table there answered research question three. Item 9 with 3.23 mean rate the respondents agreed that patients have suffered rejection and neglect in the hospital where they are receiving care. In the same vein, the respondents in item ten(10) with mea of 3.20 agreed that acts of neglect and rejections many lives have been lost. Likewise in item eleven(11) , mean rate of 3.51 the patients confirmed that their fellow patients have been abandoned in the hospital because of strange signs and symptoms of sickness.

4.5 Table Four: Research Question Four; Do the patients of the selected hospitals have good knowledge of the functions public relations?

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	FX	\bar{X}	DECISION
12	I have good knowledge of the functions of public relations officers in the hospital	38	32	63	64	438	2.2	Disagreed
13	Public relation officers have helped me get good health care in the hospital	17	11	83	86	353	1.79	Disagreed
14	I do not have good knowledge	62	65	39	31	552	2.80	Agreed

	of public relations in the hospital							
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Source: Field Survey 2019

Item 12 to 14 answered research question four (4). Item twelve(12) with mean of 2.2 the respondents disagreed of having good knowledge of public relations officers in the hospitals . Similarly, the patients disagreed that public relations officers have helped them to get a good health care in the hospital. In conclusion, item 14 the respondents agreed that they do not have good knowledge of public relation in the hospitals.

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The result of the study revealed the levels of communication between patients and health workers in Abakaliki metropolis is very poor. The patients are not satisfied with the relation. They likewise complained that they do not receive prompt attention from the health workers especially the nurses to attend to them at when due. The responses of the patients concurred with the findings of Tanny and Keshinro(2013) that patients in government hospitals do not perceive the medical care gives in public hospital has been communicative and responsive to their emotions

The study also discovered that many health workers do not have good manner of communication. In addition, the researchers found that there is no functional public relation unit in these hospitals. The information unit in the hospital do not serve the interest of the patients but for image protection of their health institution. The study also revealed that is there is no much regard on roll of public relations officer in the hospitals and that nurses and doctors do not regard public relation as an important post in their services to the patients in the health institutions.

From the research question three, the study revealed that patients of the selected hospital have suffered several degrees of neglects and some have been abandoned because strange Signes and symptoms. Due to the these problems many lives have been lost. In conclusion, the patients admitted in the hospitals do not have good knowledge of public relations officers in the hospital where they are receiving treatments. It is based on this analysis that the researcher find that patient should have a good information of the office to lodge their complain in the hospital. There no effective public relation officers trained to serve the interest of the public by protecting the interest of the patients.

5.2 Summary of findings

1. The levels of communication and relations between patients and health workers in the selected hospitals in Abakaliki Metropolis were very poor.
2. There is no effective use of public relations in solving patients' communication problems in the selected hospital.
3. Communication gap has caused a lot of damages to the patients admitted in the selected hospital in Abakaliki Metropolis
4. The patients admitted do not have good knowledge of public relations officers

5.3 Conclusion

The conditions of patients in Nigerian hospitals are very bad.. The communication gap between patients and health providers in Nigeria hospitals can only be tackle by well trained public relation officers. The poor communication level of health workers have denied the patients access to faire hearing on their health statistics. The role of mass media cannot be denied any levels of the society. The social responsibility function of the media should prevail to enable the citizens enjoy their freedom of express and fare hearing.

5.4 Recommendations

The researchers recommended the follow as way forward of solving this problem;

1. The media should not be quite over the levels of neglect and bad treatment of the sick Nigerians who seek health care in the hospitals
2. There should be a functional public relations units in all the public hospitals in Nigeria who will be assisting patients.
3. The patients should be given faire hearing to their health condition.
4. The public relations officers should not protect only the image of the hospital there serving but also their patients.
5. Information and communication skills should be added in the curriculum of health education in Nigeria to enable health workers have good communication manner.
6. Training and retraining should be conducted to already working health workers in the hospitals on the importance of good communication
7. Health workers should see their patients with care and in good manner.

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