



# The role of libraries in promoting health literacy for combating non-communicable diseases in Tanzania

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## Abstract

Health literacy is an important aspect to every individual in the society. This is due to the fact that a health literate person understands his/her health status, take prevention and control measures of various diseases. The purpose of this paper was to discuss how health literacy for prevention, control and treatment of non communicable diseases can be conducted by libraries in Tanzania. The researcher reviewed several literatures and found out that libraries have a big role to play to ensure that community recognize their information needs, search for relevant information and make use of the information to make informed health decisions. The study concluded that because non communicable diseases impose a double burden to the government and her people a call for immediate actions from various stakeholders' such as health libraries is required.

**Keywords:** Health Literacy; Non-Communicable Diseases; Libraries; Tanzania

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## 1. Introduction

Health literacy as an outcome of health promotion (Nutbeam, 2000) has been defined differently by many authors (Wickline and Rosenthal, 2010; Dodson et al., 2015; Osborne, 2012). Wickline and Rosenthal (2010) defines health literacy as the ability to locate medical facilities, schedule and keep appointments, describe, monitor, and measure symptoms, follow prescribed medication or treatment regimens, adjust medications or treatment as needed, seek care when appropriate, determine risk and take preventive actions. According to Dodson et al., (2015), health literacy means motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health. Osborne (2012) says that health literacy involves two parts - patients or anyone receiving health communication and providers or anyone giving end health communication.

While some authors see health literacy as an important to patients, others see it as important thing to all people in the community regardless of their health status. The later perception insists on preventive (most cost effective) and control mechanisms for diseases, while the earlier show that health literacy is for people who are already affected by diseases. Since people need to stay healthy, health literacy then become an important thing to everyone. This is mainly because in many cases health literacy is related to the health status of patients and community at large (Powell et al., 2007; Baker et al., 2007; Tang et al., 2008; and Sanders et al., 2009). Health literacy is also linked to economic development such that people with low health literacy do not have the ability to engage effectively in socio economic activities due to poor health status.

## 2. The magnitude of non communicable diseases in Tanzania

Merriam Webster Dictionary, (2016) defines NCDs as medical condition that is not capable of being communicated by direct contact. It includes disease such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and chronic lung disease. It is estimated that NCDs is responsible for almost 70% of all deaths worldwide; with three quarters of all NCDs deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2016). NCDs have been primarily related to four major risk factors: tobacco use, physical inactivity, the harmful use of alcohol and unhealthy diets (increased fat and sodium, with low fruit and vegetable intake) (WHO, 2016).

Although NCDs are not currently the leading causes of death or potential life loss in Sub Saharan Africa; which account approximately 25%, it is estimated that the rate will be 42% by the year 2030 if necessary actions will not be taken (Naik and Kaneda, 2015). In Tanzania, NCDs contributed to an estimated of 31% of all deaths in 2014 (WHO, 2014) which is an increase of 3% of that of 2011 (WHO, 2011). This situation calls for special attention so as to rescue the life of people and for the economic development of individuals and the national in general.

Tanzania has a lot of libraries including academic libraries, public libraries, hospital libraries and other health centres. However, nothing is known about how these libraries involve themselves in health promotion except for some of the health libraries. This has motivated this study with the aim of discussing the role of libraries in combating non communicable diseases in Tanzania.

### 3. Methods

Data for this paper was collected through the literature review whereby all papers with information about health literacy in combating non-communicable diseases were collected and used in this study. Collection of papers was done using various databases with relevant information including LibHub - a Library Gateway to Information resources (<http://libhub.kiox.org>), Google scholar ([scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com)), World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The literature searching was conducted after three major steps; (i) Search formulation where the topic was analyzed to give key concepts (Health literacy, Libraries, Non Communicable diseases, Diseases, Diabetes, Cancer Tanzania), (ii) Choosing the appropriate information sources, and (iii) Use the identified keywords in step (i) to conduct search in the LibHub, Google scholar, WHO and UNDP databases. The searches were restricted to the publications dated from 2000 to date. Only search results which were found relevant for this study were selected and used.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. The role of libraries in promoting health literacy for combating NCDs

Libraries have been noted to support community development in various areas such as education, economic, research and health. Experiences show that libraries act as a bridge of information from information providers such as government, organizations and institutions to the people. Libraries are known to be the centre of knowledge which collects various information resources including health information resources for the users, local gateway to knowledge capable of providing basic conditions for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of individuals as well as social groups (Ghosh, 2013). It is through libraries that some communities get informed on socio-economic matters.

Tanzania has many libraries which include public libraries, academic libraries, health libraries, and information centers. However nothing is known about how these libraries involve themselves in health promotion except for some of the health libraries. The study by Chipungahelo et al. (2015) support this by reporting that 25 health libraries were identified under the project of AHILA-Tanzania Chapter, the project which started in June 2013 and ended in September, 2013. These health libraries are playing a vital role in promoting health literacy. According to Chipungahelo et al. (2015) the AHILA-Tanzania Chapter supported health literacy promotions in which among other things, it promoted relationship and network among health librarians and information professionals within the libraries and information centers in health settings, and carried out a number of activities such as preparing brochure with health information, recruiting members, trainings, developing a 'yahoo group' for easy communication and resource sharing among members. Libraries should continue these initiatives started by AHILA-Tanzania Chapter by promoting health literacy for combating non communicable diseases.

Libraries have the role of collecting vital, quality and relevant health information resources for combating non communicable diseases. According to Obidike and Nkechi (2011), libraries should collect and compile

health information, store them in suitable media which can be easily accessed by policy and decision-makers as well as other health information users. Librarians are advised to partner with community health workers which include medical doctors or veterinary doctors and other health personnel in order to gain access on vital health information issues for health development and disease awareness (Obidike and Nkechi, 2011). Chipungahelo et al. (2015) argue that libraries are able to collect vital health information, including information resources on how to avoid the circumstances that cause health problems, and on providing preventative health programs and treatment programs. Libraries should be able to harness and store relevant health information resources which can help in combating non communicable diseases.

Promotion of health information resources is important in order to raise awareness of non-communicable diseases and how to combat them. It is the obligation of public libraries, academic libraries as well as hospital libraries to provide accessible and reliable health information sources and services to the community (Orban, 2005). According to Ghosh, (2013) libraries and health centers can help in disseminating health care information to unprivileged community especially the rural community. It is the role of health librarians or health information officers to promote and enhance access health information as they are capable of providing needed assistance through training and through the selection, repackaging, and dissemination of relevant materials (Chipungahelo et al., 2015). Libraries should disseminate health information about the causative agent of non-communicable diseases and preventive measures. Promotion of health information should be made by using brochures, leaflet, newspapers, magazines and others which should be distributed to the public with the aim of increasing awareness about the diseases and how to fight them. Librarians have the role of promoting health information literacy to all kinds of library users, in order to help many people have “the ability to recognize a health information need, identify likely information sources and use them to retrieve relevant information; assess the quality of the information and its applicability to a specific situation; and analyze, understand, and use the information to make good health decision” (Orban, 2005).

Libraries are supposed to provide training and health education to the community on health literacy for combating non communicable diseases. They should organize seminars on health education (Obidike and Nkechi, 2011), the education which for example will help people in changing their behavior and hence combat non communicable diseases. The librarians should make sure they impart knowledge of health literacy for combating non communicable diseases to health information consumers (Chipungahelo et al., 2015). Moreover, they should provide training on how to use ICT devices to access health information for combating non communicable diseases (ECOSOC, 2010).

Apart from training and seminars, libraries particularly health libraries from health institutions in Tanzania can create an e-repository of systematic documentation of health information resources or virtual library of health promotion practice, which will include good practices and lesson learned, which will be consulted by practitioners, policy-makers and academicians (McQueen et al., 2014). The repositories will help various health information consumers to make best health decisions concerning non communicable diseases and how to combat them. Also, the repositories will help health practitioners, doctors, decision makers and politicians to get useful information which in return will help them to make good decisions on how to protect the community and combat non communicable diseases.

The experience from other countries shows that health promotion in the library is not a new thing. According to IFLA (n.d.) 81% of local government library authorities in England provide access to e-information on health and wellbeing as well as literacy skills to support health literacy so as to improve access and use of health information. Public libraries are involved in informing the public about important health issues through speeches from doctors, nurses and other from health professionals as well as provision of special health services for the disabled (Parker and Kreps, 2005). In Botswana public libraries serve communities with health information through various ways such as outreach, library brochures/leaflets, newsletters and library exhibitions (Ntlotlang and Grand, 2016).

#### 4.2. Opportunities which can be used by libraries to combat NCDs

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) provides immense opportunities to store, process, retrieve, disseminate and share information. It provide tools such as radio, telephone, mobile phones, newspapers, television and website which can be used to disseminate and share information aiming at fighting non communicable diseases. The report by Chipungahelo et al. (2015) indicate that in Tanzania health information has been promoted and disseminated through library's websites, organization's websites, mass media, newspapers, meetings, exhibitions and other information communication materials. According to ECOSOC (2010) advance in ICT has made dissemination and access of information more possible as more information has been made available through the Internet and other multimedia formats, it is possible for electronic learning, the use of text messaging, web 2.0, and online social networks are becoming increasingly common in the daily lives of people even in some developing countries. Mobile devices such as smartphones, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), and laptops as well as wireless and satellite communications are giving remote communities an opportunity to be connected and have access to health information hence expanding the possibility of providing health literacy (ECOSOC, 2010). All these opportunities can be taped by libraries to fight non communicable diseases.

Another opportunity which can be used by libraries is its closeness to the community; public libraries and community libraries are a good example of this, also they serve diverse population in the community. Edwards and his fellow describe public libraries as a place where people get information and other services to sustain almost every aspect of life (Edwards et al., 2013).

Moreover, librarians skills and knowledge in information and communication management when partnering with health professionals can best be utilised to promote health particularly NCDs (ECOSOC, 2010; Chipungahelo et al., 2015; Ghosh, 2013).

#### 4.3. Challenges encountered by libraries when promoting health

The study conducted by Metta et al. (2014) identified a number of challenges which hamper the efforts to combat NCDs in Tanzania. They indicated that lack of specific policy to address NCDs, limited context-relevant information on the epidemiological patterns of NCDs and inadequate health system have negative implication to the efforts to address non communicable diseases.

Financial constraint was mentioned by Chipungahelo et al. (2015) as the major challenge facing libraries in promoting health literacy. According to Chipungahelo et al. (2015) funds allocated for the distribution of promotional materials to health centers are not enough. Fund is always needed to support training programmes, for preparing of promotional materials including brochures, leaflets, training materials and others.

Another challenge is the ability of providing quality and reliable health information by various libraries. Orban, (2005) argues that if librarians will not be able to select and disseminate quality and reliable information will mislead the health information consumers to fail to make important decisions because health information consumers depend on the health information obtained from libraries to make important decisions regarding their well-being.

Health illiteracy is a challenge among the people especially in rural community. Many people are not aware of the causative of many diseases including non-communicable diseases. Despite the efforts made by available libraries and NGOs, still efforts are needed to increase health literacy promotions especially in rural communities. Orban (2005) argues that librarians should work hard to increase awareness of diseases, their causes and preventive measures to meet the special information needs of health consumers with inadequate health literacy skills.

The location and settings of any library may hinder or encourage certain people to use information services or resources. For example out of 25 health libraries which were found in Tanzania, 17 health libraries were located in training institutions which may be difficult for other people than the institution community to use them.

## **5. Conclusion**

Although NCDs are not currently the leading causes of death in Sub Saharan Africa and Tanzania in particular special attention on the efforts to fight NCDs need to be put in place because firstly the diseases impose a double burden to the government and her people and secondly, the death rates keep on increasing year after year. In spite of the fact that, libraries can be used to promote health, the effectiveness of the libraries in promoting health and combating NCDs in particular is not known in Tanzania.

## **6. Recommendations**

It is recommended that, since the effectiveness of health promotion efforts is not known, health libraries need to devise proper mechanisms to assess their efforts. Libraries should tap the available opportunities such as ICTs tools and social media which are increasingly becoming common to daily lives of people. Moreover, librarians should be proactive to update their skills and knowledge to cope with fast development of ICT.



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