



ADVANCING CANCER CONTROL EFFORTS IN NIGERIA: REFLECTIONS ON WORLD CANCER DAY 2022 IN A VULNERABLE STATE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract – Objective: Cancer, the second leading cause of death globally, disproportionately affects low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Nigeria. World Cancer Day (WCD) is one of several interventions to increase awareness of the disease. Bayelsa State is desirous of reducing its cancer burden and is making efforts in that regard. The objective of this paper is to describe the activities conducted in the oil-rich and cancer-prone Bayelsa State of Nigeria to commemorate WCD 2022.

Materials and Methods: A coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) spearheaded the marking of WCD 2022 in the state. Several activities, including advocacy visits, awareness campaigns on air and in the streets and screening for preventable cancers, were organized.

Results: Seventeen NGOs participated in the WCD 2022 activities that involved the eight local government areas (districts) in the state. More than a hundred persons participated in the walk that traversed a major road in the capital. Many people were screened for cancer and a large audience was reached with key messages of the day through the different media deployed for the campaign.

Conclusions: The WCD 2022 built on the previous edition that was held in 2021. With the injection of adequate resources and support from government and non-governmental bodies, cancer care can be improved, and the burden of the disease can be significantly reduced in Bayelsa State and Nigeria at large.

KEYWORDS: Bayelsa State, Cancer, Control, World Cancer Day, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Cancer continues to occupy the second position on the list of diseases responsible for the deaths recorded globally every year. It is estimated to kill about 10 million people annually ¹. The low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Nigeria remain disproportionately affected as about 70% of deaths from cancer occur in these countries ².

Several initiatives are in place to give adequate attention to the global challenge of cancer. A notable one is World Cancer Day (WCD), which is marked on the 4th of February annually ³. Since

the first WCD was marked in 2001, it has become a rallying point and a day to arouse mass consciousness and action against the disease. Although only a day is designated for its commemoration, activities culminating on the day usually start well before the day and continue till the following year.

Evidence abounds that those on the positive side of the social determinants of health (SDOH) including the rich, the educated, and those in urban areas have better access and outcome when faced with cancer ⁴⁻⁷. It is in recognition of this unacceptable and growing gap that the theme “Close the Care Gap” was chosen by the Union for International



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Cancer Control (UICC) as the running theme for the next three years, 2022-2024, with each year dwelling on a different perspective in addressing the care gap in the fight against cancer⁸. The first year of the triennial campaign was designed to highlight the problem and increase the understanding of inequities in cancer care globally with a view to mobilizing efforts to address them⁸. Health is a fundamental human right and if the second principle of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - leave no one behind - is to be honored, then opportunity for cancer prevention and care should be available and accessible by all irrespective of their location, gender, socio-economic status and other living or environmental conditions^{9,10}.

THE COMMEMORATION SETTING

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and bears a high burden of cancer on the continent. Despite the presence of a national cancer control programme and a national cancer control plan, poor resources have hindered the implementation of the plan. There is no national screening programme for preventable cancers and cases get to the hospitals at advanced stages with poor and rural dwellers worse affected. In addition, treatment facilities are few and far and the cost of care is out of reach of the majority who lack health insurance^{4,11-13}.

Bayelsa State is an oil-producing coastal state in Nigeria. The profile of the state and its cancer vulnerability is highlighted in a previous article that gave an account of World Cancer Day 2021 in the state¹⁴. WCD 2022 observance in the state leveraged the achievement of the previous edition. The coalition-building effort that was initiated post-WCD 2021 led to a formation of an alliance to fight cancer in the state christened Coalition Against Cancer in Bayelsa State (CACIBS) (Figure 1). CACIBS is currently made up of 17 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and professional bodies including the Bayelsa State chapter of the Breast Cancer Association of Nigeria (BRECAN) - the only member organization solely dedicated to the fight against cancer. Other members comprise professional bodies, non-profit, and for-profit NGOs. The coalition aimed to work with and complement the efforts of the government to close the care gap and strengthen cancer control in the state.

ACTIVITIES

With more participating organizations, most of the activities conducted in 2021 were repeated on a larger scale reaching many more persons in more parts of the state through the various media that were deployed. Member organizations carried out their

CACIBS
COALITION AGAINST
CANCER IN BAYELSA STATE
...united to defeat cancer

World Cancer Day
4 February

THEME: Close the Care Gap!

Please join us as we unite to defeat cancer!

MD CAN **GOLD COAST** **OASIS** **GLORIA DIBI FOUNDATION** **APHPN** **HEARTLAND ALLIANCE LTD (HLAG)** **Rotary** **NANIM**

Road walk Starting point: Tombia Roundabout. Terminal point: Opolo Secondary School. 7:30am 4th February 2022

Fig. 1.

planned activities while we came together as a coalition to do others. Some organizations like BRECAN focused on schools and were able to reach the three senatorial districts of the state. Others carried out their campaigns in health facilities and among the population groups they serve. Specific activities carried out include sensitization about cancer, education of women on breast self-examination and clinical breast examination, and screening for cervical cancers in facilities with the requisite capacity. Where there were no facilities, patients/clients were directed to centers where age-appropriate screening tests could be done. CACIBS members created their customized WCD posters with their photos and “Close the care gap message” on UICC’s website and circulated them widely via their social groups. Radio jingles carrying key messages about cancer and WCD 2022 were produced in three major languages (English, Ijaw, and Pidgin English) and were posted via several social media platforms to inform the public about cancer. The coalition featured on several radio and television programmes to educate the public about cancer, activities lined up for the day and post-event actions.

The flagship event was a road walk named “Bayelsa walk against cancer”¹⁵. It was staged in Yenagoa, the capital of the state. The walk started at about 9:00 am (GMT+1:00) from a popular and busy location where many motor parks are situated – an opportunity to reach many people with the message of the day. The procession traversed a major highway in the city, a popular market, and terminated at a secondary school adjacent to the market. The walk was led by a musical band and a public address system blared the jingles informing residents of the city about the different modalities of detecting and preventing cancer. The band stopped intermittently at strategic places and different speakers gave the key messages of the day. Fliers with cancer control messages were freely distributed along the way to people in their homes, shops, offices, passengers in moving vehicles and pedestrians. The Federal Road Safety Corporation (FRSC) and the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) were actively involved and ensured traffic control and protection of participants during the road work. COVID-19 preventive measures were observed during the walk.

Advocacy visits were scheduled and paid to key ministries and parastatals relevant to closing the care gap in the state. Notable among these was the Bayelsa Health Insurance Scheme (BHIS). BHIS is the parastatal responsible for the social health insurance programme of the state government. It is entrusted with the protection of residents of the state from financial catastrophe while consuming health goods and services thus moving the state towards universal health coverage. We advocated for the inclusion of

cancer care which was hitherto not included in the benefit package of the scheme thus making cancer treatment prohibitive for the majority of patients.

DISCUSSION

Diverse activities, predominantly organized by NGOs, were held in different parts of the country to mark WCD 2022¹⁶. The lack of an inclusive coordinating system at the national or subnational levels means a lot of these events may not be captured and their impacts may remain unreported. For the second consecutive year, Bayelsa State joined cancer advocates in Nigeria and the world to commemorate WCD to sensitize the public and critical stakeholders to the burden of cancer and to galvanize support to fight the disease. Unlike WCD 2021 which was organized by two bodies, WCD 2022 was commemorated in the state by a coalition of 17 member organizations. This is a critical step in the logic model envisioned for the state¹⁴. Stakeholders are being progressively identified and partnership is being built in the process. Worthy of note is the leadership shown by the Ministry of Health (MOH). The Desk Officer for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) at the MOH was involved and participated in the preparation and execution of the day’s events. To further show the seriousness and commitment of the MOH, the Permanent Secretary, Director of Public Health, and the Technical Adviser to the Governor on public health education participated in the road work. The involvement of top technical officials of the MOH gives optimism and is a good omen for the needed collaboration to advance control efforts and ultimately develop a workable cancer control plan for the state. The critical next step is to conduct a holistic situation analysis to understand the various domains and dimensions that are essential to address to have an implementable plan for a heterogeneous state that has a lot of hard-to-reach settlements. While taking this public health approach, individuals have now been informed about cancer prevention and care and are expected to increasingly utilize cancer screening and treatment services that are available in the state.

CONCLUSIONS

Bayelsa State is making a steady, albeit slow progress in its cancer control efforts. Having the government take ownership and driving the process as outlined in the logic model, injecting the needed resources and expanding its insurance benefit package to include cancer care, and continuing to foster partnership are essential to closing the care gap



and establishing an effective cancer control programme for the state. Technical and financial support from the federal government and international agencies is desirable to fast-track the process. We believe other states that are at the same level of development of cancer care in the country can follow a similar path to reduce the cancer burden in the respective states and the country at large.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors were involved in the activities of WCD 2022. ASO conceptualized and wrote the first draft of the manuscript, AAD and TSA did the literature search and reviewed the draft. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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