



THE ROLE OF INFORMATION IN THE EARLY DETECTION OF BREAST CANCER AMONG RURAL WOMEN

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Abstract: *Breast cancer is the commonest cancer among women globally and its death rate is particularly higher among the rural dwellers. In Nigeria, late presentations of breast cancer cases has been consistent for three decades. Early detection is the first best option for a successful treatment but in an environment where there is no established national screening programme for breast cancer, it is pertinent to assess the role of information in the early detection of breast cancer among rural women who are particularly at risk due mainly to ignorance which is brought about by inadequate information.*

Index Terms: Breast cancer, Early Detection, Rural Women

INTRODUCTION

Regarding the outrageous increase in breast cancer advancement and mortality rates around the world, rural women are particularly at risk due to lack of awareness about breast cancer. It is evident that the stage at which breast cancer is detected or diagnosed has a tremendous impact on its treatment and survival is much better if the concerned individual sought for treatment at the early stage of the disease but this depends on the individual's awareness of the possible significance of the early signs. Despite relentless efforts channeled in the fight of breast cancer, reports (World Health Organization, 2021, American Cancer Society, 2022) still reveal that a high number of rural women are still ignorantly dying of the disease and are still more likely than women living in cities to be diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer – the most severe form of the disease. This obviously is because as underserved population, rural women have limited access to health information and as such, are subject to serious disparities in healthcare and generally have serious health threats than the rest of the public.

Information is pivotal in all spheres of life and could play a vital role in breast cancer early detection among rural women. In an environment where ignorance that results to late detection and presentation of breast cancer seems to be predominant and where there seems to be no established national screening programme and center for breast cancer, there is an urgent need for early detection information measures, since the fact remains that an informed mind is better equipped with knowledge for self-survival. This paper aims to discuss the concepts of

breast cancer, early detection; the nature of information needed in breast cancer early detection; importance of awareness in early detection, and the role of information in early detection of breast cancer among rural women.

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer has been described as an ancient disease which has been mentioned in almost every period of recorded history (Random History, 2008). In fact, as early as ancient Egyptian civilization, evidence of breast cancer has been seen in humans, all of which were declared untreatable (Health Care, 2010).

Breast cancer as a disease of the breast, is a cancer that forms in the tissues of the breast, usually the lobules (glands that make milk) and ducts (tubes that carry milk to the nipples), and occurs in both men and women, although male breast cancer is rare (Mayor Clinics, 2022). Inside a woman's breasts, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), are fifteen to twenty sections called lobes. Each lobe is made of many smaller sections called lobules. These lobules have groups of tiny glands that can make milk.

During lactation, breast milk flows from the lobules through these tubes called ducts, to the nipples. Fat and fibrous tissues fill the spaces between the lobules and ducts. Also, the breast contains lymph vessels, which are connected to small round masses of tissue called lymph nodes. Groups of these lymph nodes are near the breast in the under arm, above the collarbone, and in the chest behind the breast bone. According to Canadian Cancer Society (2023), Malignant (cancerous) changes in the cells lining the ducts or the lobules result to breast cancer. In other words, breast cancer begins in the cells, which are the building blocks that make up tissues and other parts of the body. Normal cells divide, grow and die in a controlled way but sometimes, cells keep dividing and growing without normal control, causing an abnormal growth called tumour. Some of the tumours in the breast are actually benign, meaning they are slow growing and at large extent, harmless while some lumps in the breast are not even tumours at all. Tumours that invade and destroy other cells are known as malignant tumours, which can be life threatening (American Cancer Society, 2021). Thus, the difference between benign and malignant tumours is that while benign tumours are rarely a threat, can be removed surgically and usually do not grow back, do not invade the tissues around them, and do not spread to other parts of the body, malignant tumours on the contrary may be a threat to life, often can be removed but sometimes grow back, can invade and damage nearby organs and tissues (such as the chest wall), and can spread to other parts of the body. American Cancer Society (2022) stated that some of the more common benign breast diseases are hyperplasia, cysts, fibroadenomas, and calcifications and even though these are described as not dangerous, American Cancer Society further emphasized that a few of the benign diseases of the breast do increase the risk for later development of breast cancer.

Early Detection

In cancer treatment and diagnosis, the term early detection is commonly used to denote a measure in cancer detection, for a better chance of treatment and cure. As conceptualized by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), early detection implies finding breast cancer, or any form of cancer early before there are symptoms or as soon as they develop, before it has time to spread to other parts of the body. Suggesting that although cancer is sometime unavoidable, finding it early when it is still small and has not yet spread can dramatically improve the chances of beating it. In other words, the longer a tumour goes unnoticed, the greater the chance that the cancer has spread, which usually makes treatment more difficult, particularly among rural women who may not be well informed about the disease.

Rural Women

As the name implies, these are women who spend most of their lifetime in the rural areas and participate in the rural activities. Although there is no generally accepted definitions on what communities, regions, or areas to be called 'rural', Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations(2018) described it as a sparsely populated area in which farm people depend on natural resources; including villages and small towns that are dispersed through these areas. Iwe (2003) described with slightly different view that rural areas in Nigerian context is any area that is far from the urban city; a village, a hinterland with no good access roads, no pipe-borne water, no electricity, no factories and industries. Amanze and Ibenne (2011) in their own opinion expressed that places are generally considered rural when they lack basic social amenities such as good roads, healthcare, power supply, pipe-borne drinkable water, schools, etc, whether or not they are distant from urban areas. Iwe (2003) further explained that rural communities differ from one another in demographic composition, general characteristics, area of land, etc and that in spite of these differences; researchers believe that about 70 percent of the population of every average rural community in Nigeria suffers from illiteracy.

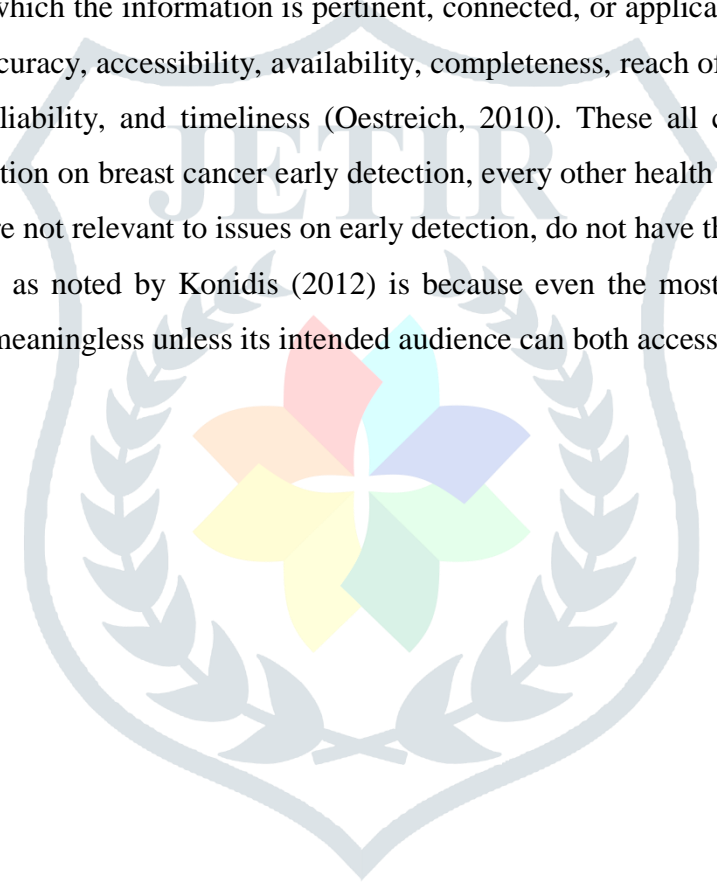
These rural areas that have been described are according to Amanze and Ibenne (2011) inhabited by people (women inclusive) with low economic potentials, illiterates, semi-literates, school drop outs, etc, who have limited or no access to social amenities, including agencies of information dissemination. Ukachi (2001) opined that from a layman's point of view, rural women are referred to as women residing in a remote area or village in which virtually all economic and social services necessary for life enjoyment are currently lacking. Notably, these group of women are inclusively regarded as part of the broad category of information users in any given information society. According to Aina (2004) information users are in different categories and have different background; while some are highly educated, many are not, while some are old people, many are young and while some live in the rural areas, others live in the urban areas. Thus, from the perspective of rural women-as-a group of information users, Kreps (2002) described rural women as underserved population, who often have limited access to relevant health information, especially information widely available over the internet, and who are also subject to serious disparities in health care and generally have much higher rates of morbidity and mortality due to serious health threats than the rest of the public. Muhammed (1996), Ukachi (2001) and Jiyane (2002) described them as women who can barely read or write, who have poor reading habits, who lack comprehension and use of English as a conventional language, who fail to understand meaning of a signage in roads, public places, towns and big cities and who also do not comprehend the meaning of certain laws, regulations and procedures. This according to Amanze and Ibenne (2011) and Zaid and Popoola (2010) is due to low level of literacy which acts as a great inhibitor to information access and assimilation in rural communities, and for which women living in rural areas are known to be suffering from general deprivation, including

The Nature of Information Needed in Breast Cancer Early Detection

Pertinent to breast cancer early detection, various research (such as American Cancer Society, 2009, National Cancer Institute, 2011, Komen Cure, 2011) have shown that the vital information women need include basic facts such as: what breast cancer is, who gets breast cancer, risk factors associated with breast cancer, how to prevent breast cancer, early warning signs of breast cancer and early detection approach for breast cancer. Through such basic information, awareness and knowledge of screenings heralds a welcome shift from reactive

medicine to a more proactive approach to healthcare, in which information about risk factors would help individuals take measures to reduce risks Ahuja and (Chakrabarti, 1996).

The information must however, be relevant and shaped to accurately convey meaningful message, be culturally and linguistically appropriate and in plain or local language and be at the educational and technical level that is appropriate to the user (Konidis, 2012, Global Health Workforce Alliance, 2011). The spread of information is obviously taking its full course in this era of information explosion and in view of this, Omagbemi and Odunewa (2004) as cited in Ilo and Adeyemi (2010) pointed out that the ability to generate and spread information is not usually a challenge rather, it is linking the information generated to the information people need to live a better life that often proves difficult in most cases. In an information-rich-world, the wealth of information could mean the dearth of something else in that same information (Anderson and Gladwell, 2009), and such lack is the relevance of information (Cowling, 2011). On this note, Bolund (2003) specifically described relevance of information as the extent to which the information is pertinent, connected, or applicable to the matter at hand. In other words, it implies the accuracy, accessibility, availability, completeness, reach of information to the location of information consumer, reliability, and timeliness (Oestreich, 2010). These all connote that although rural women have need of information on breast cancer early detection, every other health information, no matter how good and important, which are not relevant to issues on early detection, do not have the capability of meeting this all important need. The fact, as noted by Konidis (2012) is because even the most critical and highly needed health information becomes meaningless unless its intended audience can both access and understand it.



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