

INTEGRATION OF FREE HEALTH CARE SERVICES FOR THE ELDERLY PERSONS IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

In Nigeria, especially Abia State, Health care of the elderly is the responsibility of the immediate and extended family members. This has brought an untold hardship, neglect and untimely death of these group because they cannot help themselves due to life challenges and age. Some of them who rely solely on their children may not have a child who is financially capable of doing this. The elderly are retirers and they belong to the vulnerable groups that should be catered for because of the various life challenges they face at this age. Therefore, the study determined the integration of free health care services for the elderly persons in Abia State. The study adopted a survey research design (SDR). Four purposes and four research questions guided the study. Questionnaire were used for data collection and was based ethical consent of the retirers who collect their pension from the Abia Statepensions board. Data were analyzsed using frequencies and mean. Any item below 2.50 was rejected and any item above 2.50 was accepted. The population for the study was all the retirers who collect their pension from the Abia State sub – treasury. They were 1630 persons. A sample size of 33retirees were sampled based on ethical informed consent. The paper recommended that free health care services of the elderly should be incorporated into other free health care services (such as immunization, oral pooling, etc.) by the government through the state ministry of health. The challenges of their health care should not be left for family members alone. Also, non – governmental Organizations, missionaries and foundations be should involved in the free integrated health care services.

Keywords: Integration, Elderly, health, care, service and free

Old Age is one of the things people of all races all over the world are desiring and look up to become old one day. Old age could be defined using chronological, biological and psychological concepts. Chronological age is the one that is based solely on the passage of time. It is a person's age in calendar years, chronological age is the number of years a person has spent in life from the time he/she was born. Chronological age is used for legal and financial issues like retirement. While biological age refers to changes in the body that commonly occur as people age, for instance, hearing and vision of people usually worsen as people age. Meanwhile psychological age is based on how people act and feel as they age. For instance, an 80 year old person who works and

participates in many activities is considered psychologically young and is said to be young at heart.

In this paper, the chronological concept of aging is adopted. Old people are those elderly people that have attained certain number of years from the time of birth as specified in legal documents for retirement from active service. The elderly is a period of life after retirement usually with references to deterioration, (Merriam – Webster, 2015). The definition of elderly continues to change especially as life expectancy in developed countries has risen to beyond 80 years old (Dong, Brandon and Lan, 2016). However, as the standard of living is improving on a daily basis and people live longer now, growth in the number of elderly adults is unprecedented. Also in a paper published in the science Journal of “Nature presented the conclusion that the maximum life span is an average age of 115 with an absolute upper limit of 125 years (Dong, Brandon and Lan, 2016).

The elderly in this study are old people from 75 years and above. Moreso, gerontologists have recognized the very different conditions that people experience as they grow older within the years defined as old age. All over the world most people in their 60’s and early 70’s are still fit, active and are still able to care for themselves (Allyn and Bacon, 2010). However, after 75 years of age most of them will become increasingly frail, a condition marked by serious mental, health and physical debilitation. Aging adults experience high risk of chronic disease. Common chronic conditions include; heart disease, cancer, chronic bronchitis, stroke, diabetes mellitus among others. These chronic conditions can lower quality of life for elderly adults and contribute to the leading causes of death among this population, so they need regular medical check-ups to enable them function optimally on a daily basis.

In December 1991, the United Nations adopted a set of principles for older persons recommending that all member governments incorporate them into their programmes for elderly people. The principles are based on the following: Declaration of the rights of elderly persons which was summarized by the United Nations General Assembly as follows; to add life to the years they have lived, assuring all elderly persons; independence participation, care, self fulfillment and dignity”. Hence, healthcare service for the elderly is considered a major responsibility of everybody in the society. Care is the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance and protection of someone (John and Edmund, 2017) Despite the UN, Declaration the elderly healthcare service is left for the family.

Although, Abia State is a society that takes care of their elderly within their traditional social structure and customs. Traditionally, care for the elderly is the responsibility of their children and relations. Ajomale (2007), observed that care for the elderly has always been taken to be a filial responsibility, performed in families with little or no government support in Abia State, Nigeria. Care is given by the whole family unit, including spouses, uncles, aunts brothers and sisters as the case may be. Care of the elderly was regarded as an obligation. The care of the elderly were the moral imperative

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which was considered not only material bliss but also spiritual and elders expect these care from family members without asking for it. But today the case is different because of the global recession, unemployment, high cost of living, human right abuse, low investment, inflation high cost of medical bills, disintegration of the extended family system, poor value system among others has all contributed to the noticeable decline in the level of care provided by the family in recent times. Another, crucial problem is the general assumption in Nigerian society that care for elderly people has always been provided by the extended family system and that this provision of care services has always been adequate. This assumption is wrong, as recent studies has shown (Aboderin, 2006).

Many families cannot provide the health care services for these elderly persons due to insufficient resources, global recession, human right abuse, disintegration of the extended family system, poor value system among others, so health care services provided by the state and local government, however, may be unavoidable. Integrated service delivery is the Organization and Management of services so that people get the care they need, when they need it in ways that are user friendly, to achieve the desired results and provide value for money (WHO 2007). Therefore, this study is advocating for integration of free health care services for the elderly by the Abia State government just like free immunization, oral polio, etc. to help ameliorate their sufferings, since most of the burden again rest on the immediate family with meagre resources because of the high cost of medical treatment, fake drugs, sold in chemist shops where the elderly persons go to mix and buy drugs which may never be suitable for the ailment. Moreover, the elderly who need urgent attention are neglected “because they are suffering from old age sickness” (Fayemilehin, Ayandiran and Salami, 2007). Also, the attitude of our younger generation to the elderly is quite despicable. There is much intolerance and impatience for the elderly on the part of family members, the elderly persons to prefer to remain in their sick bed at home awaiting for death as an alternative to unaffordable cost of healthcare services, such decision has placed a lot of doubts on one’s wish and plan to live longer after withdrawal from active services (Anderson and Hussey, 2011).

So, if Abia State government provides a free health care service in every community where these elderly ones will walk into and receive free health care treatment without payment. It will be inline with the sustainable development goals (SDG: 3) that health has a central place in all SDGs. Integration of free health care services will also sustain their lives and promote their well-being. Although, the elderly have lost their earning status and so many of them have become frail, yet they are a great source of knowledge experience and skills for the family members. Also throughout their life, they have witnessed many trials and turbulences, rise and falls which have equipped them for life, thus the elderly persons are a great reservoir of information, skills and knowledge. The elderly person must be provided with health care service support by the state government through ministry of health. The elderly person must be helped to realize that their waning years are not meant to be frustrating and sorrowful. This is in-line with the

observations of the National study of the change workforce (NSCW, 2008), that the elderly care should involve helping older persons with things that are difficult or impossible for them to do by themselves, which include direct and indirect care for the elderly and helping elderly with some health challenges. The indirect elderly care involves among others overseeing medical care of the elderly (NSCW, 2008).

1.2 Statement of the problem

Health care services in Nigeria, especially Abia State have been and are still very poor. One of the limitations to the full achievement of a universal healthcare delivery system is the limited coverage of Nigerians under social health insurance. National Health Insurance was established to improve the health of all Nigerians inline with the Sustainable Development Goals: 3: to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. at an affordable cost through various prepayment systems. Through this scheme a universal coverage for all Nigerians is targeted at an affordable cost. It aims to provide social health insurance on a contributory basis where health care services of contributors and their dependents relations provided from a common pool of fixed regular amounts made by the contributors. However, the coverage is still below 5% (WHO, 2017). Some of the reasons can be attributed to ignorance, poor funding, fondly among others. These 5% are workers in paid employment where a direct deduction from their wages are made into the pool. The larger uncovered population are mostly the unemployed who live in the rural areas and urban areas. There are people in paid employment who are yet to key into this plan for lack of proper machinery that seeks to enforce the provisions of the act that set up the scheme. Also essential basic health services are lacking where private clinics are available, they are not affordable, since about 70% of Nigerians live below 81 dollars per day, it is easy to understand why most people do not have physical and financial access to basic health care service. Also the disintegration of the extended family system has also hampered the healthcare services available for the elderly persons in Abia State. So from the ongoing it is now easy to understand why most elderly people do not have physical and financial access to basic health care service. This formed the reason for this advocacy; integration of free healthcare services for the elderly persons in Abia State.

Meanwhile, an advocacy is a way of telling people or informing a community about an issue that is very pertinent and needs their attention. It is also a term used to raise awareness on current issues of concern to a community and or groups of persons with peculiar needs like the elderly persons.

Advocacy is done best to handle an issue of great concern such as health care services. Advocacy is very important for matters that are apparent to local communities. It can simply be explained in different phases such as;

- Advocacy is active promotion of a cause.
- It involves actions that lead a selected goal.
- Advocacy is one of many possible strategies or ways to approach a problem.

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- Advocacy can be used as part of a community initiative, nested in with other components
- Advocacy does not necessarily involve confrontation or conflict rather, in all its forms it seeks to ensure that people particularly those who care for most vulnerable in society are able to have their voices heard on issues that are important to them, defend and safe guard their rights. Advocacy in health care services of the elderly persons is apt because nearly every community harbours elderly persons.

However, health according to World Health Organization (WHO, 2014) is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being, it is not merely the absence of infirmity. Good health is the greatest asset anybody can boast of and it is a prerequisite for National Development and Sustainability. Also, elderly persons face serious challenges in managing their health especially due to inadequate financial support, the delay in payment of pensions, gratuity, unemployment of their children and wards and economic recession has made the elderly sorrowful. For instance, Okolie (2017), stated that pensioners in Abia State are dying on a daily basis as they could no longer afford their health medications. All these has also led to hypertension, deterioration in health and death of the elderly persons. While the SDGs (3) states that Nations should ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, elderly inclusive, yet Abia State is still compounding problems of the elderly persons. Integration is a means to improve service in relation to access quality user satisfaction and efficiencies. So integration of free health care service is a way of bringing health care service such as diagnosis, treatment, care, rehabilitation among others within the reach of the elderly persons (Grone and Garcia – Barber 2002).

1.3 Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study is the integration of free health care services for the elderly persons in Abia State by state Government. Specifically the study determined;

1. The types of healthcare services that are available for the elderly persons in Abia State.
2. Identified the problems of health care service available for the elderly persons in Abia State.
3. determine the reasons for the integration of free health care services for the elderly persons in Abia State.
4. Identified ways of integrating free health care services for the elderly persons in Abia State.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the types of health care services that are available for the elderly persons in Abia State.
2. What are the reasons for the integration of free health care services in Abia State.
3. What are the problems that affect health care services of the elderly in Abia State.

4. What are the ways of integration of free health care services for the elderly persons in Abia State

METHODOLOGY

Area of the Study: The study was conducted in Umuahia North L.G.A of Abia State.

Design of the Study: The study adopted a descriptive survey Design (DSD)

Population for the Study: The population for the study consisted of all elderly persons who worked and retired under the local Government service commission Abia State. These elderly persons collect their monthly pension from the Abia State sub treasury Umuahia.

There are about 1630 elderly persons in Umuahia North L.G.A (Abia State Pensions Board, Statistics Data base, 2017). These elderly persons were selected because they are over 75 years old and are still agile to move about, any retiree below 75 years was not part of the study

Sample for the Study: The sample for the study consisted of 33 elderly persons who were purposely selected based on ethical consent (Ethical consent is the process in which a participant consents to participate in a research project after being informed of its procedures, risk and benefits (Bulger, 2003). It is an instrument of mutual communication between participant and researcher with an expression of authorization or choice for the researcher to act in a particular way (Satyanarayana, 200).

Validation of the Instrument: The instrument was face validated by three experts from the department of home science and hospitality management and tourism, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike. The suggestions are incorporated into the final draft of the questionnaire. A split half method of using the spearman's Brown's correlation formular was used to correlate the data generated. The reliability index of 0.81 was obtained and adjudged reliable for embarking on the study. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to note each of the items on a four point scale as follows; strongly agree, 4, agree 3, Disagree 2 and strongly disagree 1,

Data collection techniques: A total of 33 copies of the instrument were administered by hand. All the 33 copies of the questionnaire administered by hand were properly filled, returned and were used for the analysis.

Data analysis technique: The responses were analyzed using means, a mean score below 2.50 indicated negative response while a mean score of 2.50 and above indicated positive response. Mean was used to answer the research questions.

RESULTS

Table 1: Mean rating on the types of healthcare services available for the elderly persons in Umuahia North L.G.A of Abia State.

S/N	Types of healthcare services available for the elderly persons.	\bar{X}	Decision
1	Healthcare service from Government hospitals	3.57	Accepted
2	Healthcare services are available in private clinics	3.57	Accepted
3	It is also available in medical centers of institutions	3.34	Accepted
4	Healthcare services are available in traditional medical centers	3.07	Accepted
5	It is also available in amount health centers	3.60	Accepted
6	It is available through occasional free medical care, organized by NGOs and people in diaspora	3.00	Accepted
7	It is available in pharmaceutical/Chemist stores	3.56	Accepted

Table 1, shows that all the items had mean scores above the cut-off point of 2.50 indicating that the respondents accepted all the items as available healthcare services in the state. This means that the elderly use any of these available healthcare services to obtain treatment of an ailment.

Table 2: Mean ratings of respondents on the problems of the health care services available for the elderly persons.

S/N	Problems of healthcare service available	\bar{X}	Decision
1	Insufficient trained personnel	3.51	Accepted
2	Lack of infrastructure like electricity, good network and pipebornewater	3.48	Accepted
3	Disintegration of extended family system	3.48	Accepted
4	Lack of equipment in the hospitals/healthcare centers	3.55	Accepted
5	The “out of stock” syndrome/hoarding	3.59	Accepted
6	Problem of irregular payment of pensions	3.65	Accepted
7	Unemployment of their children and wards	3.58	Accepted
8	Provision of the Drugs and equipment to private clinics	3.60	Accepted

Table 2; reveals that the respondents agreed that the items are problems that affect the health care services of the elderly persons in Abia State.

Table 3: Mean ratings of the respondents on the reasons for the integration of free healthcare services for the elderly persons in Abia State.

S/N	Reasons for integration of free healthcare	\bar{X}	Decision
1	it is for longevity of the	3.60	Accepted

2	elderly person It is for healthy living and well-being	3.70	Accepted
3	To avoid suffering of terminal illness	3.55	Accepted
4	It is for the encouragement of the elderly persons	3.40	Accepted
5	It will enable them have equal access to relevant healthcare services	3.60	Accepted
6	It is needed because of relative low standard of living	3.00	Accepted
7	It is needed because of delay in the payment of pensions and gratuity	3.50	Accepted
8	It is needed because of high rate of unemployment of children and wards	3.55	Accepted
9	The elderly are great reservoir of information, skills and knowledge	3.70	Accepted
10	Because healthcare provided by family is never adequate	3.70	Accepted
11	It enhances access to health care services	3.80	Accepted
12	It is to improve quality care	3.60	Accepted
13	It lowers overall healthcare costs	3.70	Accepted
14	To reduce depressive symptoms	3.50	Accepted

Table 3: Revealed that all the identified items were considered major reasons for the integration by the respondents. All the items met the criterion mean score of 2.50, this implies that these are reasons for integrating free healthcare services for the elderly persons in Umuahia North L.G.A of Abia State.

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Table 4: Ways of integrating free health care services for the elderly persons in Abia State.

S/N	Ways of integrating of free healthcare services	X	Decision
1	It can be through the three tier of Government.	3.41	Accepted
2	It can be from international bodies such as UNO, WHO, World bank etc.	3.30	Accepted
3	It can be through foundations e.g for heart, kidney, old people foundation.	3.54	Accepted
4	It can be done by missionary services.	3.60	Accepted
5	It can also be through extension services by trained health workers.	3.09	Accepted
6	Integration of free healthcare services can be through non Governmental Organization (NGO).	3.21	Accepted
7	Through community based health care centers.	3.60	Accepted
8	It can be through rehabilitation units, cardiology, surgical centers	3.55	Accepted

Table 4; shows that the respondents agreed with the items as ways of integrating free healthcare services for the elderly in Abia State. All the items met the criterion mean score of 2.50, this implies that free health care services can be integrated through government hospitals, rehabilitation units, foundations, international bodies, NGO and extension healthcare services.

Discussion of findings

The results of this study have been quite revealing and instructive. The findings revealed that there are different types of healthcare services available for the elderly persons in Abia State but they were either too expensive, or out of reach, no trained personnel or drugs were out of stock which made it difficult for the elderly to obtain the healthcare service they required. This finding is in line with the findings of Federal Interagency forum on Ageing – related statistics (2008), who observed that the cost of health care and medical services care per capital for persons aged 65years and above in developed countries is three to five times greater than the cost for persons below 65 years (Anderson and Hussey, 2011). They also stated that the issue of high cost of services has affected the zeal in seeking physicians attention or medical check-ups by the elderly particularly in Abia Society. Also, Anderson *et al* (2011), stated that most elderly persons has preferred to remain in their sick bed at home in waiting for death as alternative to unaffordable cost of healthcare services, such decision has placed a lot of doubts on one's wish and plan to live longer after withdrawal from active services. This funding is not in agreement with SDGs (3) which ensures healthy lives and well-being for all at all ages (WHO, 2017). The elderly population is characterized by the existence

of multiple chronic disease conditions that need regular medical check – up to enable them function optimally on daily basis. Such services are paid for especially in developing regions such as Nigerian in particular Abia State (Valdez, Angeles, Parega – Coupuz and Harnabdez (2013). They also stated that the services are highly expensive and unaffordable to the retirees. As a consequence, it becomes apparently difficult for the pensioner to receive regular medical attention due to low income and non payment of pension allowance. It was also found in table 2 table there are a lot of problems confronting the health care services available for the elderly persons in the state and this has affected their health negatively. In line with the above findings. Ajomale (2007), observed that conditionally, healthcare for the elderly was the responsibility of their children and relations. He observed that care of the elderly has always been taken to be filial responsibility performed in families with little or no government support but today the case is different because of the global recession, unemployment, high cost of living, human right abuse, high cost of medical treatment, disintegration of the extended family system, poor value system among others. This infers that the elderly in the state do not obtain the right health care services they deserve and many will die as a result of neglect. The findings on the problems of healthcare system is not in support of the findings of Ukpore (2012), who opined that family members ought to care about each other and show it through word, actions and deeds. She further stated that they should be committed to promoting each other's growth, happiness and health.

The findings in table 3 revealed that all the reasons for integration of free health care services are necessary because according to Gross and Crandall (1980), medical care is difficult for families to provide because of its unpredictability and its high costs, so preventive care and prepayment on the insurance principle are means of reducing medical cost. This infers that it is necessary to integrate free health care service for the elderly into the already existing health care services for the retirees. This is in conformity with the SDG (3). Also, in line with the findings is Hoff (2007), who posited that there is a noticeable decline in the level of healthcare services provided by family members for the elderly, so this makes integration of free health care service for the elderly a necessity. Also, without free health care service it will be impossible to have a generation of healthy and well-being elderly persons with the high cost of healthcare services in the State.

These findings shown in table 4 revealed that all the highlighted ways/methods of integration of health care services for the elderly are necessary. This findings of this study agreed with the views of Gross and Crandall (1980), that one of the outstanding points of free clinics is that groups of medical personnel practice as units, thus making possible easy consultation and sparing the patient time and energy spent in going from one specialist to another. They also asserted that, when doctors band together, their combined knowledge, skill and jointly owned equipment are available for the elderly at a lower cost than if the elderly approaches each separately. This infers that the integration of free health care services for the elderly is highly needed in the society.

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The findings are also in line with Koder (2003), who stated that the process of integration can aim at linking parts within a single level of care, primary, secondary and tertiary care. Also in line with the findings, Leichsenring (2004), stated that elderly persons tend to be chronically ill and subject to multi-morbidity hence a broad spectrum of needs has to be met over a long period of time, because of the need to fulfill this task there is a number of possible ways to choose from. However, many more efforts are needed to fully address many different persistent and emerging issues, yet Abia State government is still compounding this issue for the elderly because of non-payment of pension and gratuity lack of transportation system.

Conclusion

The following conclusions were drawn based on the findings of the study. Old age is one of the things people of all races are desiring and looking upto. Older people are those elderly people that have attained ascertain number of years from time of birth as specified in legal documents for retirement from active service. Traditionally, care for the elderly is the responsibility of their children and relations, but today the case is different because of global recession, unemployment, high cost of living, disintegration of the extended family among others. So there is need for integration of free health care service by the state Government. So that the elderly can have a healthy live that will promote their well-being for longevity. Although, health care services has been in Abia State, it is still very poor, limited and never free for the elderly persons that is the reason for the advocacy. Advocacy is one of the strategies or ways to approach a problem in a society and continuous advocacy will create an awarens for all. The paper identified the types of health care services available for the integration and ways of integration of free health care services, if these problems are handled carefully the integration of free health care will be a success and it will prolong the longevity of the elderly persons in Abia State. Remember an adage says “Health is wealth”. Also, when wealth is lost, nothing is lost but when health is lost everything is lost.”

Recommendations

Considering the importance of advocacy for the health care services to the elderly persons generally, the following recommendations were made.

1. The three tiers of government should incorporate free health care services into other free health care services (Such as immunization, oral polio etc) through the state ministries of health.
2. The challenges of elderly health care should not be left for family members alone.
3. Missionaries should also establish functional free health care servicecenters just as they establish schools.
4. Creating awareness of the free health care services center in the state will ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages..

Justification of advocacy for healthcare services

The findings of this study supports the evidence that advocacy for free healthcare service is necessary in ameliorating the sufferings of the elderly persons after retirement. Healthcare of the elderly, is a major responsibility of the government so there is need for advocacy of free healthcare services. The general populace needs to be properly informed on simple health care practices for the maintenance and sustainability of good health of the elderly as stated by the United Nations (1991) to add life to the years they have lived, assuring all elderly persons, independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity. Also, justification for integrated health care service is to meet “patients needs rather than providers”. So any government that falls to place the patients at the center of their integration efforts are unlikely to succeed.

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