

WORLD CANCER DAY 2021: BUILDING A COALITION FOR CANCER CONTROL IN A HIGH-RISK STATE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract – Objective: World Cancer Day (WCD) observed annually every 4th February has become a rallying point to create awareness and galvanise action globally to fight cancer. This paper describes the activities carried out in the oil-rich Bayelsa State of Nigeria to commemorate WCD 2021.

Materials and Methods: Two non-governmental bodies collaborated to organise a series of campaign activities. These included health talks in clinics and on air, and a road walk that enjoyed the participation of other stakeholders in cancer control in the state.

Results: Health talks and screening for the leading cancers were carried out in clinics and religious houses in all the eight districts of the state. Radio and television stations hosted talks on cancer prevention and control and over a hundred persons participated in the road walk. A large audience was reached with key messages of the day through the different media deployed for the campaign.

Conclusions: WCD 2021 was able to sensitise residents of Bayelsa State to the growing burden of cancer and stimulated them to action. With sustained effort and commitment of all stakeholders, the state may soon have a well-established Cancer Control Programme and set the pace for other states in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Bayelsa State, Cancer, Nigeria, World cancer day.

INTRODUCTION

Cancer has assumed an increasing significance over the last few decades and is now the second leading cause of death worldwide (second to cardiovascular diseases). It is estimated to have killed about 10 million people in 2020 alone¹, and the number of new cases is expected to rise increasingly if decisive action is not taken to stem the tide². Though there are more cases of

cancer in high-income countries, sadly the majority (70%) of deaths from the disease occur in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Nigeria².

Recognizing the growing menace of cancer and the urgent need to reduce the burden of the disease, the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), as a major outcome of the historic World Summit Against Cancer for the New Millennium in Paris in 2000 established World Cancer Day (WCD) and



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declared it to be commemorated annually on 4 February to mark the date of the summit^{3,4}. WCD aims to draw global attention and galvanize individuals, organizations and government at all levels to intensify efforts at controlling the disease.

The theme for WCD 2021 was “I AM AND I WILL” and marks the last year of the three-year theme which ran from 2019-2021⁵. The year 2021 focused on the actions a person can take to inspire change and progress in a wider sphere as compared to 2020 and 2019 which emphasized actions a person can take for their loved ones and actions a person can take to cut their own cancer risk, respectively⁵. The 2021 commemoration coincided with WHO’s launch of the global strategy to accelerate the elimination of cervical cancer⁶. As a result, the spotlight for WCD 2021 was on cervical cancer. Though a preventable and curable disease if detected early, yet globally, a woman dies from cervical cancer every two minutes and about 90% of the deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries where Nigeria belongs⁶.

About a tenth (12,075; 9.7%) of all new cases of cancer in Nigeria in 2020 were attributable to cervical cancer and it accounted for 7,698 cancer deaths (10.1% of cancer mortality) in the country⁷. This translates to a loss of 21 women per day! Nigeria has a national cancer control plan but implementation has been ineffective. Most of the targets set for 2020 were missed and it is unlikely that there will be a satisfactory scorecard at the expiration of the current plan in 2022⁸.

Bayelsa State is no exception to the apathy greeting non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Nigeria. Still grappling with the control of infectious diseases, NCDs including cancer have not been given the

deserved attention. Recognizing the inadequacy of the government and the need for other stakeholders’ support in health care delivery, the Bayelsa State branch of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) in collaboration with Oasis Public Health Consulting Ltd resolved to end the discomfiting silence about cancer and sensitize and educate residents of the state and draw the attention of the government other stakeholders to the disease. This is considered a critical step in forging an alliance to establish an enduring cancer control programme for the state. This paper describes the activities that were conducted in Bayelsa State to mark WCD 2021 and discusses the promise the historic event holds for cancer control in the state and in Nigeria at large.

BAYELSA STATE PROFILE

Bayelsa State is one of the 36 states in Nigeria and one of the six states that make up Nigeria’s south-south geopolitical zone (Figure 1). The state is divided into eight local government areas (districts) and has a 2021 population of 2,633,466 projected from the 2006 national census⁹. It produces 30-40% of Nigeria’s oil and gas and there is substantial oil and gas exploration and exploitation in almost all the eight districts of the state¹⁰. This makes residents of the state prone to cancers that have been linked to oil exploration and exploitation, especially those working in oil installations and those living in oil-producing communities with frequent oil spills and incessant gas flaring^{11,12}. The Department of Public Health in the State Ministry of Health is responsible for both communicable and non-communicable disease control. However, funding for

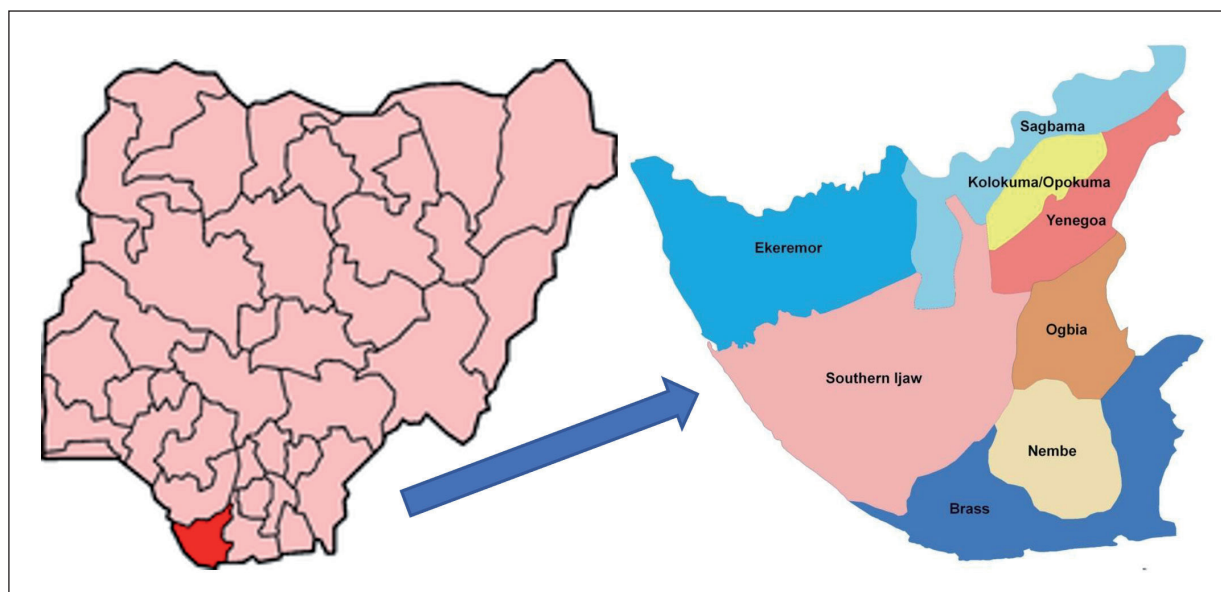


Fig. 1. Map of Nigeria showing Bayelsa State.

disease control is mainly from development partners and international donors and is predominantly for communicable diseases thus leading to an apparent neglect of NCDs including cancer. The state does not have a Cancer Control Programme in place though there are pockets of uncoordinated activities related to cancer control. The only cancer registry in the state is based at the Federal Medical Centre, Yenagoa, one of the two tertiary health institutions in the state.

ACTIVITIES

Pre-WCD activities

The management of Oasis Public Health Consulting Limited (Oasis PHC) initiated a conversation with the leadership of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Bayelsa State branch about pooling resources together to partner with the government of Bayelsa State in charting the way forward for cancer control in the state. Oasis PHC has been in the forefront of cancer control activities in the state through its programme, “Cancer Awareness and Prevention Campaign” (*CAPCAMP*). Oasis PHC is a public health consulting firm headquartered in Bayelsa State. Its contribution to health care delivery covers three thematic areas of research, training and services for public health¹³. The NMA is the umbrella professional organisation of all medical doctors and dentists practising in Nigeria and plays a vital role in health care delivery, advocacy, policy formulation and policy implementation in Nigeria¹⁴. A series of meetings was held, and this culminated in the commemoration of WCD 2021. Invitation was sent to non-governmental organisations that had collaborated with NMA before. These included Rotary Club of Yenagoa and Dickson Cancer Foundation.

A schedule of activities was drawn and NMA members were asked to use all the days of the working week (1-5 February) to enlighten their clients about cancer with an emphasis on the theme of the year. They were urged to offer prevention services, teach on breast self-examination (BSE), do clinical breast examination (CBE), screen for cervical cancer or refer to facilities where it can be done, and do or encourage screening for prostate cancer. NMA has a phone-in radio programme christened *Radio Clinic* on Rhythm 94.7 FM (a popular private radio station in the state) every Tuesday 15:00-16:00hr. Two Tuesdays, 2nd and 9th February were devoted to cancer awareness and control and the public was informed about the activities lined up for the day and for post-event actions.

Activities of the day

The day started with residents of the state and its environs waking up to hearing about cancer in the public enlightenment segment of the first news of the day on Radio Bayelsa. The public enlightenment article was written by the Managing Director of Oasis Public Health Consulting Ltd and was titled “**2021 World Cancer Day - I AM AND I WILL**”. This was aired at prime time on Radio Bayelsa at 6:00 hr, 13:00 hr and 18:00 hr.

A road walk was staged and started from the busiest motor park in the state (Ekeki park), about 9 am. The walk traversed a major highway in the city and terminated at the biggest and most popular market in the state (Swali market). The walk was led by a band and a public address system blared radio jingles on cancer. The jingles were designed in the three major languages spoken in the state - English, Ijaw, and Pidgin English. The band stopped intermittently at strategic places and a speaker gave the key messages of the day. Fliers on cancer were freely distributed along the way to people in their homes, shops, offices, banks, 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 walk. COVID-19 prevention measures like wearing of face mask were observed during the walk.

Many physicians in their respective facilities, as instructed by the NMA, counselled their patients/clients about cancer, examined, screened and referred or directed them to facilities where age-appropriate screening tests could be done or for further investigations.

Christianity and Islam are the two dominant religions in Bayelsa State with the former being predominant. Faithfuls of both religions were encouraged to use their religious platforms to spread the key messages of the day. A PowerPoint presentation on cancer control with a focus on the theme of the year was made by Oasis PHC and circulated on NMA and other platforms for interested persons to adapt to their audience.

Members freely created their own WCD posters with their photos and “I AM AND I WILL” messages customized on UICC website and circulated widely via their social groups. The radio jingles in the three languages were also freely posted via several social media platforms to inform the public about cancer. Enlightenment activities continued beyond the day with professionals making appearances in different fora. A notable one was a television discussion on cancer on NTA Yenagoa on Saturday, 6 February 2021 during the 19:00 news which was widely watched in the state.



DISCUSSION

World Cancer Day 2021 was epoch-making in Bayelsa State being the first in a long time where many stakeholders came together in a renewed commitment to fight a disease that is projected to increase in incidence if the passivity of the moment continues². We employed different media to reach residents of the state and its environs and there is anecdotal evidence that the message of the day went wide way beyond those that physically witnessed the rally. It may be difficult to quantify the outcome of the day but using multiple channels of health communication on a day like this has been found to have a great impact and facilitate adoption of services being promoted¹⁵. There is a compelling need to reinforce the key messages of the day throughout the year by continuous public engagement.

The WCD 2021 provided an opportunity to identify individuals and organisations that are potential advocates and supporters of cancer control activities in the state. There is a need to sustain the momentum created by the event by creating a platform where all stakeholders can come together. Going by the three domains of the index of cancer preparedness developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit – policy and planning, care delivery, and health system and governance¹⁶ – we recommend the following sub-domains as top priorities for the state: development of a state cancer control plan; establishment of a population-based cancer registry; improvement of immunization coverage for vaccine-preventable cancers; establishment of an inclusive state-wide screening programme for

different cancers especially cancer of the breast, cervix and prostate; improvement of access to diagnostic and treatment services including establishing a referral centre for cancer diagnosis and care; and political will that is crucial to the sustainability of the entire process. Figure 2 shows the control plan envisioned for the state.

CONCLUSIONS

With the changing demography in favour of agedness, cancer incidence is expected to rise progressively. Urgent and concerted effort is, therefore, needed to stem the increase and the devastating effects of the disease on the people of Bayelsa State. Nigeria as a country is yet to establish an active and effective Cancer Control Programme and if Bayelsa State can harness the resources at its disposal, it can blaze the trail for other states and the country at large.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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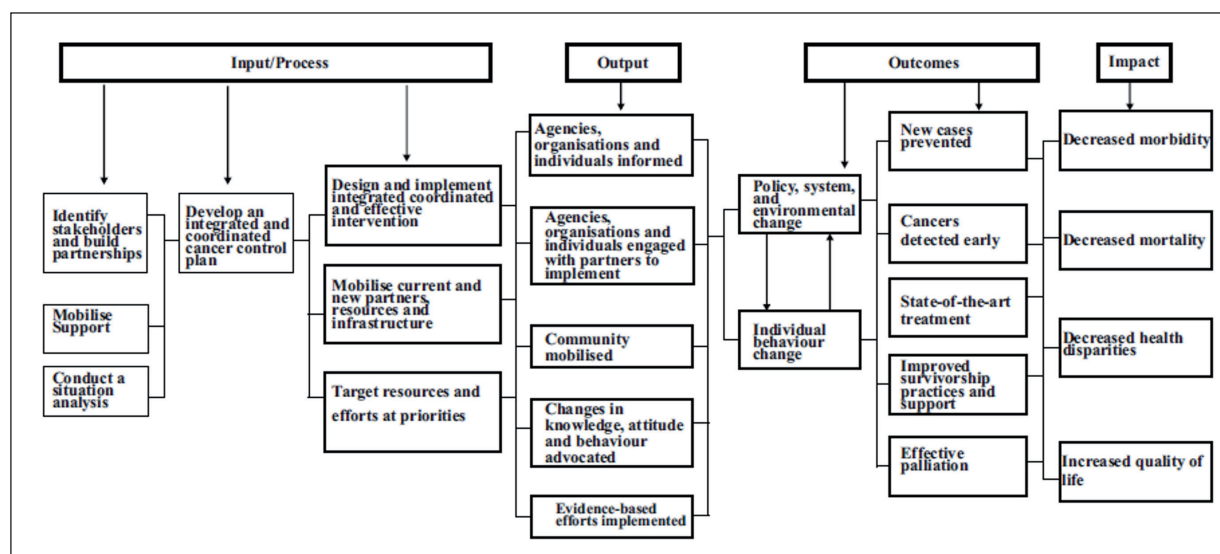


Fig. 2. Cancer Control Plan Logic Model for Bayelsa State, Nigeria (Adapted from National Comprehensive Cancer Control Program (NCCCP) Logic Model with CCC Priorities <https://www.iccp-portal.org/system/files/resources/NCCCPLogicModel.pdf>).

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