

Coronavirus Disease-19 in Nigeria: Reshaping Workplace Orientation

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ABSTRACT

Background: The World Health Organization declaration of coronavirus disease-19 outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern was made on January 30, 2020. In Nigeria, the first diagnosed case of coronavirus disease-19 was reported on February 27, 2020, by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Since then, several cases have been confirmed with some deaths recorded and some confirmed cases being discharged after testing negative twice.

Method: This is a review paper in which the authors used the documentary approach to synthesize information from grey literature, journal articles and renowned public health websites. To gather relevant materials for the review, the authors used search terms like Coronavirus disease-19 in Nigeria, Coronavirus in the workplace, NCDC report of Coronavirus, WHO report of Coronavirus, and Coronavirus disease-19.

Results and Discussion: One of the major concerns has been how to fully return to work and reopen businesses without increasing infection rate pending on when curative vaccines will surface. This paper discusses how coronavirus disease-19 response is reshaping workplace orientation amid rising concerns in Nigeria.

KEY WORDS

coronavirus disease-19, Nigeria, workplace orientation

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization on January 30, 2020, declared the coronavirus disease-19 outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. In Nigeria, the first diagnosed case of coronavirus disease-19 was reported on February 27, 2020, by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)¹⁾. Since then, several cases have been confirmed with some deaths recorded and some confirmed cases being discharged after testing negative. As of April 21, 2020, the NCDC reported that out of a total of 8934 samples tested for the presence of coronavirus disease-19, 782 cases have been confirmed so far, 197 confirmed cases have been discharged and 25 persons have died²⁾. At present, persons mostly affected in Nigeria are within the age bracket of 31-40 years and people within this age group constitute about 20% of the population; 70% of patients are males, the rest are females³⁾. In Nigeria, public enlightenment about coronavirus disease-19 have been through social media, radios and television stations. Also, markets, educational institutions and workplaces have been shut down. Large public gatherings, international travels and interstate travels have been banned as measures to curtail further spread of the virus. One of the major concerns has been how to return to work without increasing infection rate pending on when effective vaccine and treatments will surface. This paper discusses how the coronavirus disease-19 response is reshaping workplace orientation amid rising concerns in Nigeria.

METHOD

This is a review paper in which the authors used the documentary approach to synthesize information from grey literature, journal articles and renowned public health websites. In order to gather relevant materials for the review, the authors used search terms like Coronavirus disease-19 in Nigeria, Coronavirus in the workplace, NCDC report of Coronavirus, WHO report of Coronavirus, Coronavirus disease-19.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coronavirus disease-19: an overview

Coronavirus disease-19 which is also known as COVID-19 is a disease caused by a virus that can spread from animals to human and from human to human. The virus that causes COVID-19 is a new coronavirus that has spread globally. The symptoms of COVID-19 ranges from a mild illness which include fever, cough etc. to more severe illness such as pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death. Coronavirus disease 2019 is perceived as an ailment caused by a new coronavirus now known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV)³⁾. Stewart, Connelly and Robinson posited that SARS-CoV-2 belongs to a family

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of single-stranded RNA viruses known as coronaviridae, which is a common type of virus that affects mammals, birds and reptiles⁵. The virus when contracted by humans causes common mild infections similar to the common cold and it accounts for 10% to 30% of upper respiratory tract infections in adults⁵. Esper, Ou and Huang stipulated that coronaviruses can cause enteric and neurological disease⁶. The incubation period of a coronavirus as put forward by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) varies but it is generally up to two weeks or fourteen days⁷.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), coronavirus disease-19 is transmitted when individuals that have the virus coughs or exhales, when that happens, they release infected droplets of fluids. Majority of these droplets of fluids falls on nearby surfaces and objects such as chairs, desks, tables, telephones etc. WHO went further to postulate that people could contract coronavirus disease-19 by touching contaminated surfaces or objects when they touch their eyes, nose and mouth without knowing. If individuals are standing within one meter from a person with coronavirus disease-19, they can contract the virus by breathing in the infected droplets coughed out or exhaled by the infected person. In other words, coronavirus disease-19 spreads similar way to flu. Generally, most persons infected with coronavirus disease-19 experience mild symptoms and recover from the disease. However, some individuals may experience more severe illness and require hospital care. The risk of severe illness rises with age, that is, individuals that are over forty years are likely to be more vulnerable than those under forty years of age. However, individuals with weakened immune systems and those with diagnosed conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease, cancer etc. are also more vulnerable to severe illness⁸.

Government response to coronavirus disease-19 in Nigeria

Owing to the dangerous nature of coronavirus disease-19, the Nigerian government is making every effort possible in fighting the disease for it to be contained and not spread from one individual to another. The very first major action took by the government was to open registration forms in airports for incoming passengers into the country to fill and also to mount temperature reading machines to check their temperature, since the first coronavirus disease-19 case recorded in Nigeria was someone who flew in from Italy, which is one of the most hit countries. Passengers coming into the country were expected to fill in the forms provided; their location and phone contacts of themselves and next-of-kin; this to enable contact tracing of people that may develop illness or test positive for the virus. The mounted temperature reading machines provided by the government at the various entry points of the airports was to ensure every person coming into the country passes through it before doing the immigration formalities. The reason is to detect people with fever and high temperature which in any case is a trigger or a pointer for an individual to be examined thoroughly. Should individuals suspect any symptom of the virus, they are expected to reach out to NCDC and when a test is carried out and the result is positive, NCDC engages in contact tracing of people that might have come in contact with them. These were the first measures individuals were expected to follow in Nigeria⁹.

The Federal government and State government in Nigeria have been making frantic efforts in fighting the coronavirus disease-19. The president of the federal republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, established a special Presidential Task Force (PTF) committee to coordinate federal government efforts in fighting the coronavirus disease-19. The PTF is headed by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Boss Mustapha and also has the Minister of Health, Minister of Information, Minister of External Affairs, Minister of Aviation, Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, Minister of Interior, Disaster Management and Social Services, Minister of Education, Minister of Environment and relevant government agencies, for instance, the Director-General of the NCDC as members. In the various states of the federation, committees were also set up by state governors which are either headed by deputy governors or state secretaries to look into the coronavirus disease-19 pandemic.

The rising cases of coronavirus disease-19 in Nigeria were caused by many individuals who travelled into the country from countries with serious coronavirus disease-19 outbreaks like Italy, USA, UK etc. The various states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria took some measures to ensure the curtailing of the spread of the coronavirus disease-19 in their respective states. Some of the measures taken included schools closure, state boundaries closure (interstate lockdown), banning of churches and mosques services, enforcement of Social/physical distancing, banning of social activities like weddings, funerals, cinemas centres, social

clubs, etc. Some of the states of the federation made their citizens observe a mandatory stay at home order. The federal government, through the Ministry of Education, ordered the closure of all schools (tertiary, secondary and primary) nationwide⁹. This was done especially to curb the spread of the virus since some students especially those in the junior and primary schools will find it difficult to adhere strictly to the guidelines provided by NCDC, WHO, CDC among others.

In the first address to the nation on COVID-19, the President of Federal Republic of Nigeria on 29 March 2020 ordered a total lockdown of three states namely: Lagos State, Ogun State and FCT, Abuja. Residents of those states were advised to stay at home for two weeks but essential duty workers such as health workers were to continue to carry out their normal duties.¹⁰ The period of the two weeks according to the President was for the containment period to identify, trace, isolate and treat all individuals that have come in contact with confirmed cases. Another measure the President took was to set up a Committee, under the chairmanship of Zainab S. Ahmed who is the Minister of Finance. Other members include; Minister of State of Budget and National Planning; Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria; Minister of State for Petroleum Resources and the Group Managing Director of the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation. The essence of the committee was to recommend fiscal measures to address the economic disruptions occasioned by the coronavirus disease-19 pandemic⁹.

A press statement released by the Minister of Finance on 6 April 2020 stated that the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria approved fiscal stimulus packages to help cushion the effect of the economic and health challenges caused by the pandemic. One of the stimulus packages is the establishment of a five hundred billion COVID-19 Crisis Intervention Fund. The Minister also in the press statement, announced that the government would consider approaching the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the African Development Bank to raise Seven Billion Dollars loan under Rapid Financing Instrument, to finance the Economic Stimulus Package¹¹.

Challenges faced by the government in fighting coronavirus disease-19

Despite the efforts of the federal government and state governments in the fight against the virus, the country still faces a lot of challenges. One of the major challenges is the neglect of Nigerian healthcare infrastructure across all states of the federation for a long time now; this is as a result of under-funding by all tiers of government in the country⁹. Currently, as a result of poor medical infrastructural facilities in the country and poor medical manpower as a result of the migration of medical personnel to other countries of the world in search of greener pasture, COVID-19 is coming at a time that the country is poorly prepared to tackle the situation⁹. The Minister of Health in a PTF briefing revealed that an eighteen member team of Chinese medical experts will be coming into Nigeria to assist the country in the fight against this disease that is ravaging the world. This did not go down well with the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA). The president of NMA in a press statement on the pandemic on 5 April 2020 described the move of the federal government as a thing of embarrassment to all medical practitioners and other health workers in the country who are giving their maximum best in the fight against the disease under deplorable working conditions. The NMA president also expressed concerns over the lack of ventilators, face/nose masks and above all, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)¹². The Nigerian Trade Union Congress also warned the federal government against the plan of bringing foreign experts, saying it was needless as Nigeria was already handling the crisis efficiently¹³.

Another challenge faced by the government is a shortage of testing kits, and for this reason, the NCDC is not able to test more people for the virus. Although, the Director-General of NCDC during a PTF briefing on 9 April 2020 revealed that Nigeria would be testing 1,500 individuals for coronavirus disease-19 daily as against the 500 tests conducted on individuals daily. Some of the states of the federation including Oyo state and Edo state complained bitterly of inadequate testing kits for the coronavirus disease-19 (www.punchng.com, March 31, 2020). They have been donations from Philanthropist to the country such as Jack Ma of China, who distributed medical equipment to Africa countries including Nigeria, of which Nigeria got 9,999 pieces of face shields, 20,000 pieces of test kits, 100,000 face masks and 1,100 pieces of PPE which will not even be enough to take care of the coronavirus disease-19 in Nigeria, and makes it inadequate considering the population of the country.

A major challenge again faced by Nigeria government in the fight against coronavirus disease-19 is the discrepancy in the enforcement of the lockdown and social/physical distancing measures put in place by

the various states of the federation. In as much as the measure has a devastating effect on many Nigerian especially as it has to do with those working in the informal sector. The International Labour Organization (ILO) puts the estimates of those working in the informal sector to be over 70% of the total workforce¹⁴. The ILO's latest report on the coronavirus disease-19 pandemic on 7 April, estimated that 195 million jobs might be wiped out globally in the second quarter of 2020¹⁵. This will come to reality if only the lockdown as a result of the pandemic persists. Guy Ryder who is the Director-General of ILO, in a news conference on 7 April 2020 stated that workers in the informal sector who account for 61% of the workforce globally, will need income support to survive to enable them to feed their families as their jobs disappear as a result of the pandemic⁹. Although, Nigerian government made provision for stimulus packages for some of the most vulnerable of the society no provision was made for workers in the informal sector. As the lockdown continues in most of the world as a result of the pandemic, Guy Ryder stated in the UK Guardian of April 7, 2020, that if the government stopped people from working and are ordered to stay at home and there is no other source of income for them, no way to survive, no way to feed themselves, this then becomes impossible dilemmas¹⁶. In Nigeria, the government is yet to develop a sustainable cash transfer policy to support and assist the vulnerable segment of the country's workforce population to survive the hardship. The hardship faced by people in response to the lockdown measure is devastating as some citizens are responding to COVID-19 crisis in an unusual manner that may have a worse effect than the pandemic itself. Therefore, the financial health of Nigerians should be taken into consideration by the government as well.

Nations of the world, considering the hardship citizens are going through and the crumbling of their economy had decided to ease the lockdown restrictions of which Nigeria is not an exception. As the ease of lockdown continues in most of the world, Nigeria also has considered easing the lockdown with established guidelines considering the hardship ravaging her citizens and the economy. In one of the daily briefings of the PTF, the PTF chairman announced he was pleased that the measures put in place has produced adequate results that require consolidation to ensure that the Nigerian health system and economy are in the position to adequately respond to any potential outcomes or treat in the future. The PTF chairman also said that the gradual re-opening of the economy has been sign-posted by the controlled opening of government offices, and increased access to markets and supermarkets, banks, and other income yielding activities.

The Workplace

The workplace is a location whereby an employee bestows work for the employer. The workplace is can be located in a variety of settings comprising offices, stores, farms, factories, out-of-doors and in any other location where work is carried out¹⁷. As citizen go about their normal activities in their various workplaces and because COVID-19 is still prevalent in the world, individuals would have to take responsibility by adhering to the safety guideline provided by WHO. They also need to be oriented in their workplaces since people would have to adjust to the new normal. Employers of various organizations, government and non-government parastatals, educational institutions etc., have a whole lot of roles to play in terms of orienting their employees on the various safety measures and guidelines provided by NCDC. This will help them to adhere strictly to curtailing the spread of coronavirus disease-19. This will go a long way in reshaping the way individuals will adjust to the new normal. The most important advice is for all employers is to encourage their employees to maintain good hand and respiratory hygiene to remain safe, while at the same time ensuring the business and office premises are cleansed; frequently touched surfaces like countertops, desks, light switches, door handles etc. should be cleaned more frequently¹⁸. Employers must ensure that employees have access to clean water and soap at all times. Alcohol-based sanitizers are to be kept in office and business premises for employees and customers. Staff members and customers should use a hand sanitizer on entering and exiting the business or office premises and not forgetting to wear face/nose protective masks. The best way according to NCDC, for business owners and employers to ensure that employees and customers are protected from COVID-19 infection is to:

- Encourage employees to wash their hands frequently
- Encourage employees to cough or sneeze into a tissue, or their elbow (if no tissue is available)
- Clean and disinfect surfaces and premises at a minimum of once daily
- Mandate unwell employees to stay at home and observe their

symptoms

- Encourage employees to wear face/nose mask¹⁸.

The NCDC has launched a #TakeResponsibility campaign to ensure Nigerians and residents take individual and collective responsibility for reducing the risk of the coronavirus disease-19 spreading. Organizations are encouraged to join this campaign by developing key messaging around the following thematic areas;

- Ensure thorough Washing of hands regularly with soap under running water or use an alcohol-based sanitizer
- Ensure to Cough/sneeze into a tissue and dispose appropriately or ensure to cough/ sneeze into your elbow
- Ensure to avoid large gatherings and physical contact with people
- Ensure to clean all contaminated surfaces regularly with disinfectants
- Ensure to get information only from official sources
- Ensure to self-isolate for 14 days If you just returned from international travel and if you develop symptoms, call NCDC's toll-free number: 080097000010¹⁸.

CONCLUSION

One of the ways Nigerians can win the war against the coronavirus disease-19 amid the rising cases globally and Nigeria, in particular, is to take responsibility and change their hygiene behaviour. People have to follow the basic hand and respiratory hygiene measures and other necessary guidelines as recommended by the Federal Ministry of Health, NCDC and WHO. These measures will indeed shape individuals orientation in their various places of work, as they will no longer be carefree in some attitudes they paid less attention to, like indiscriminate handshakes, clustering in groups, struggling for spaces amidst people etc. Now, individuals would have to adapt to the new normal by being conscious of their environments, wearing of protective face/nose masks, frequent washing of hands after touching surfaces, avoiding crowded spaces, maintaining social/physical distancing, and being acquainted with technology for virtual meetings of all kinds, amongst others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian government strategy in fighting the coronavirus disease-19 pandemic creates some loopholes. For instance;

- The interstate lockdown measure that was put in place as a strategy for curbing the rising case of the virus has been difficult to sustain for a long time as citizens keep flouting the order as a result of hardship. This should be reviewed by the Nigerian government as the coronavirus disease-19 is usually transported partly because those who are supposed to mount the interstate boundaries do so with a lukewarm attitude.
- The government would also have to increase the capacity for proactive testing and contact tracing considering the Nigerian population of over 200 million people by providing more test kits, coronavirus test laboratories and PPEs for health workers.
- Of all the measures taken by the government at all levels, they seem to not be paying attention to the state of mental health of Nigerians. Some individuals are unusually responding to coronavirus disease-19 and this might have an injurious effect than the virus itself. Therefore, government at all levels should pay more attention to the mental health of its citizens.
- A more rapid campaign should be done on the sensitization of citizens on the need to adjust to the new normal through awareness creation in the workplaces, intranet etc.
- Employers should ensure to always provide all necessary kits (sanitizers, face masks, gloves, disinfectants etc.) in the workplace for members of staff, to protect themselves and others and also to ensure the limited spread of the virus.

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