HIV Infection, Religion and Spirituality in Nigerian Community Settings

Vera Victor-Aigbodion1,2
1 Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa,
2 Lecturer, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

This article focuses on religion and spirituality regarding People Living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (PLWH) in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper x-rayed the situation of HIV epidemic in Nigeria, followed by the impact of religion and spirituality on PLWH and finally the possible solution that can help to reduce the prevalence of the disease, as well as improve care and support of PLWH in Nigerian community settings.

Keywords: HIV infections, Religion, Spirituality, Nigeria, Community Settings.

Introduction

HIV epidemic is still a serious health challenge that demands serious attention. Presently, Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 66% of all people with HIV infection1 while 9% of PLWH globally are from Nigeria.2 Moreover, about 3.3 million people live with HIV with a 3.6% adult HIV prevalence rate.3 However, the Nigerian Government is making tremendous effort to avert this epidemic through Anti-Retroviral (ARV) drug treatment. Nonetheless, less than 50% of PLWH in Nigeria are being diagnosed and treated to enhance their quality of life, reduce opportunistic infections and impact of HIV transmission in the community.4 However, the religion of a patient can affect the way he/she perceive health and disease and association with others.12,13 Religion and spirituality can be a key role in both HIV infection prevention and care of PLWH within their community and congregation. Religion has been defined as the formal, institutional and outward expression of the sacred and has been measured by importance of religion, belief in God, religious attendance and prayer/meditation.7,8 On the other hand, spirituality includes the internal, personal and emotional expression of the sacred and is often assessed by spiritual well-being, peace/comfort derived from faith and spiritual coping.9 Previous studies revealed that an intensified religious and spiritual action is associated with less psychological distress, social functioning, greater energy and will to live, better cognitive functioning and feeling that life has improved since HIV diagnosis.10,11 Nevertheless, religion and spirituality can also worsen outcomes because of likely belief on their religion faith and rejection of antiretroviral therapy and because of views of HIV as punishment from God for sinful lives. This paper tries to point out the existing knowledge regarding on religion and spirituality as it related to the roles religiosity and spirituality play in PLWH in Nigeria. Furthermore, the paper reviewed the negative impact religion and spirituality has on PLWH and finally the possible solution that can help to reduce the prevalence of the disease, care and support of PLWH in Nigerian Community settings.

The Bane of Religion and Spirituality among PLWH: The religion of a patient can affect the way he/she perceive health and disease and association with others.12,13 Many spiritual patients strive to meet some religious needs related to their disease and failure to meet these needs may influence the type of life they live.14 In addition, the form of spirituality (negative or positive) embraced by a patient may have a precarious
influence on the condition of the disease as revealed in earlier research.\textsuperscript{15,16} Moreso, when a patient feels punished and abandoned by a higher power is termed negative spirituality and the feeling and believe that God loves and forgives them despite their shortcomings is positive spirituality.\textsuperscript{17} Patients may embrace negative spiritual/religious beliefs in preference to conventional treatment that may be detrimental to health-seeking behaviors, treatment adherence, survival and quality of life.\textsuperscript{18} Previous researches have also showed that religion and spirituality may have a hurtful effects on HIV patients banished from their religious organizations because of the humiliation/misjudgment connected with being HIV-positive.\textsuperscript{19,20} Some religious leaders and organizations have reacted with upright judgments and disapproval for people with HIV that have self-conscious behavior change.\textsuperscript{21} Messages from the pulpit about sin and a ‘bad death’ due to AIDS have been common.\textsuperscript{22,23} In an investigation of religious leaders in Nigeria,\textsuperscript{24} establish that 54\% of Christian leaders assumed that AIDS had been sent by God as a specific punishment for sexual license; a further 20\% thought that it was a divine punishment covering other transgressions. Among the Muslim leaders, 68\% claimed that it was wholly a divine punishment.\textsuperscript{24} Despite these inadequacies, religion and spirituality has been characterized to promote acceptance and support for greater well-being of people living with HIV.

The Place of Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of PLWH: In Nigeria, religion and spirituality connects people of different races, class and nationality together, including PLWH. In addition, religious principles and exercises are entangled in the activities of the people and the leaders of churches, mosques and other religious communi ties play influential roles in determining the attitudes, opinions and behaviors. Researchers have shown that a religion/spirituality can assist PLWH in adoption of protective health behaviors.\textsuperscript{10,25-34} In Nigeria, religious institutions are spread throughout the country and have the capacity to reach a large number of people. The perception of HIV patients about their health, disease and interaction with relative, friends and neighbours can be determined by the way their religious and spiritual belief influences them.\textsuperscript{35,12} Inspite of the hilarious effect of religion and spirituality on PLWH, some scholars have suggested that religious and spiritual influences can contribute immensely to high level of satisfaction with life in PLWA.\textsuperscript{34} Even more,\textsuperscript{36} investigated the views and live experiences of men living with HIV/AIDS and suggested that religions such as Catholicism can promote acceptance and support for greater well-being of men living with HIV/AIDS. In addition, religiosity may become noticeable in the patients attitudes, religious services participation, improved religious beliefs which will show in the patients personal actions such as prayer. Positive relationship between religiosity and well-being in PLWHA is based on religion providing the basis of social support, recovery of meaning in life and a coping mechanism.\textsuperscript{37,38} Therefore, since religion and spirituality could improve the adoption and practice of protective health behaviors\textsuperscript{39}, religious and spiritual-based HIV/AIDS prevention programs are assumed to be an effective way to decrease the prevalence of HIV/AIDS by encouraging harmless and less HIV risky behaviors. With this in mind, many religious organizations are getting involved in HIV/AIDS prevention education programs and are likely to be more effective in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS.\textsuperscript{40}

Conclusion

This paper presents a perspective on the state of knowledge on religion and spirituality regarding People Living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (PLWH) in Nigeria. In Nigeria, religious institutions are spread throughout the country and have the capacity to reach a large number of people. The perception of HIV patients about their health, disease and interaction with relative, friends and neighbours can be determined by the way their religious and spiritual belief influences them.

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