Ensuring appropriate reporting and surveillance of monkeypox cases in Nigeria

Francisca Ogochukwu Onukansi[1], Don Eliseo Lucero-Prisno III[2,3]

AFFILIATION
1 Department of Public Health, Federal University of Technology Owerri, Owerri, Nigeria
2 Department of Global Health and Development, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom
3 Faculty of Management and Development Studies, University of the Philippines Open University, Los Baños, Philippines

CORRESPONDENCE TO
Francisca Ogochukwu Onukansi. Department of Public Health, Federal University of Technology Owerri, 1526, PMB, Owerri, Ihiagwa, Nigeria.
E-mail: onukansifrancisca@gmail.com
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9262-1135

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Dear Editor,

The human monkeypox virus, which first appeared in 1970s in central Africa, is undoubtedly being given little attention in Nigeria. This is despite the fact that it is now considered to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern[1]. Before this recent outbreak, human monkeypox outbreaks were already recorded in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), Cameroon, Republic of Congo (ROC), Liberia, and Nigeria, between August 2017 and August 2018[2]. From January to July 2022, there have been 357 suspected cases and 133 confirmed cases in 26 states in Nigeria[3].

Monkeypox virus is transmitted through bodily fluids and close skin-to-skin contact, including through sexual activity[4]. Despite the media raising awareness of the virus, there are still no behavioral changes, and the attitude of the population remains the same[5]. This happens within the context of a declining immunity to smallpox and a rise in the incidence in the country[6]. The need for an effective risk communication strategy thus becomes imperative. It has been observed that the media have a way of reporting outbreaks, which evokes more fear and anxiety among the population instead of educating them. For instance, when the first cases of human monkeypox were reported in Nigeria, the media exaggerated the symptoms and the impact of the virus, by using unverified pictures of people with skin rashes. The media even branded the outbreak 'a new airborne Ebola'[7], leading to a lack of trust in the media. Subsequent information regarding the outbreak was not believed to be true eventually. During the outbreak in 2017, conflicting reports were reported by the media regarding preventive measures against the virus. This resulted in skepticism amongst the general population about messages on health prevention[7]. The rumor that the Nigeria military was responsible for injecting school children with the monkeypox virus, as reported by the media, led to the closure of schools[7]. It is therefore imperative to shift the role of the media from one that is disruptive to one that performs a role of a partner in containing and stopping the spread[8]. With the recent resurgence, there is a need to strategically strengthen risk communication and revert the trust of the population to the media.

It has also been reported that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic reduction in the surveillance and reporting of monkeypox disease in Nigeria[9]. With reported cases of human monkeypox virus being transmitted through contact with or consumption of animals such as rats, squirrels, and other primates[10], there is a need to continue surveillance in the country.

The current situation provides a wake-up call for the government, to address the distrust towards the media by the population and further develop surveillance systems for the appropriate monitoring of outbreaks.

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