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Emerging trends of marketing surgical cases in Africa: Balancing health financing strategies exploitation and ethical concerns

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The unmet health needs in African communities, especially for surgical interventions, have resulted in desperate attempts by families and groups to raise the necessary financial resources. Open marketing of illness and leveraging on empathy from communities deny the sufferers the dignity of humanity. This article delves into the evolving landscape of marketing surgical cases in Africa, examining its role as a health financing strategy and highlighting potential ethical concerns.

Historical context and global health support

Historically, global response to the health needs of the poor and underserved communities has been carried out in several ways. Bilateral (e.g., the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), USAID, the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID), along with others) and multinational (WHO, Global Fund, UNICEF, World Bank, along with others) as well as foundations (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation) have supported health systems and communities around the world. Medical outreaches such as Medicine Sans Frontiers and Mercy Ships, along with others, have provided lifesaving surgeries and interventions to remote sites, islands, and communities.

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Without these donors, most health systems in Africa are not sustainable [1].

Community challenges and the role of marketing

However, at the family and community level, there is still a huge gap in meeting health needs across Africa. Access to affordable and quality surgical care in many African countries is challenging due to limited resources, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and financial barriers [2,3]. Marketing has emerged as a potential solution to address this issue [4]. Traditional healers continue to use the mass media to advertise health solutions. Media houses (print, radio, and television) raise funds by showing alarming pictures of clients or having the client in the studio for live presentations. More alarming is the purported effort to raise funds at the marketplace, bus stops and public gatherings. It is common to find children with hydrocephalus, kyphoscoliosis, and cleft palate showcased with a public address system to appeal to commuters and pedestrians to part with funds. One can only view these with utter surprise and horror, especially from the point of view of a health professional. Certainly, these efforts raise concerns regarding the exploitation of patients for financial gain [5].

Ethical concerns and exploitation risks

For instance, a recent Brookings report discussed the potential for exploitation in the context of health-related

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Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies, highlighting the need for careful implementation of these technologies to ensure they contribute to health outcomes without compromising patient well-being [6]. Another study discusses the risks associated with bringing innovations to market in the healthcare sector and highlights the potential for exploitation if financial gain is prioritised over patient well-being [7]. A peer-reviewed publication that focused on medical tourism discussed the exploitation of vulnerable patients for financial gain in the context of healthcare marketing and argued that the practice of medical tourism may, at times, be warranted, such as in cases of financial limitations preventing access to proven treatments. However, it agrees that, in cases involving the acquisition of experimental or potentially harmful treatments, the exploitability of vulnerable patients for financial gain is clearly unethical [8]. These suggest that while the specific practice of marketing surgical cases may not have been extensively studied, the broader issue of exploitation in healthcare marketing is a recognised concern [5]. Further research is needed to understand the extent and impact of this practice in Africa fully. The use of social marketing strategies as a health financing strategy in certain situations aims to increase access to surgical services by leveraging marketing techniques. By creating demand and generating revenue, organisations can sustain and expand surgical programs, making these services more affordable and available. This approach bridges the financial gap that impedes access to surgical care [9], improving health outcomes and reducing disease burden [4]. When implemented ethically and responsibly, social marketing can have several positive effects [10]. It raises awareness about surgical care, educates communities on available services, and enhances healthcare resource utilisation. Strategic partnerships and collaborations enable organisations to mobilise resources and attract funding, strengthening healthcare systems. Additionally, social marketing promotes transparency, accountability, and efficiency in surgical service delivery [11]. However, there are inherent ethical risks associated with social marketing [12]. Exploitative practices may occur if financial gain overrides patient well-being and appropriate care. Misleading advertising, overcharging, unnecessary procedures, or targeting vulnerable populations without safeguards erode trust, compromise safety, and perpetuate health inequities.

Potential solutions

To mitigate exploitation risks, robust ethical standards and regulatory frameworks are essential. Clear guidelines should govern the marketing and delivery of surgical services, prioritising patient needs and welfare. Examples of mitigation plans that could be implemented include implementing Rwanda-type community-based health insurance schemes ("mutuelles") [13] to alleviate financial burdens on families seeking surgical care, avoiding the need for exploitative marketing practices. Furthermore, public-private partnerships between governments and

private healthcare providers can subsidise surgical procedures, enhancing accessibility and affordability. Collaboration among healthcare providers, policymakers, and regulatory bodies ensures oversight, accountability, and enforcement. Strengthening professional training and ethical education promotes responsible practices [14]. Other examples include deploying mobile surgical units to underserved areas and leveraging telemedicine to bridge gaps in surgical care and reduce travel costs [15]; training local expertise to improve expertise, quality and availability of surgical services [16] to reduce reliance on temporary foreign medical missions; and establishing transparent online fundraising platforms as ethical alternatives to open marketing, ensuring appropriate funds usage while preserving patients' dignity [17]. The open, social, and other marketing strategies of surgical cases in Africa are a multifaceted issue, simultaneously serving as a health financing strategy and posing potential ethical challenges. While it can enhance access to surgical care, organisations and individuals must ensure that ethical principles guide their marketing practices to avoid exploitation. Balancing financial sustainability and patient welfare is crucial for the success and ethical integrity of these marketing initiatives. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics enables stakeholders to develop and implement responsible strategies, addressing the financing gap while safeguarding patient rights and well-being in Africa.

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