

Politics of Healthcare Delivery in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis for Change

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Abstract

This paper examined the effects of politics on healthcare delivery in Nigeria. It is against the backdrop of the obvious health inequality and lack of universal health coverage in the country, thereby making healthcare delivery inaccessible and unaffordable. The qualitative research method was adopted for the study, and it relied on the exegesis and analysis of secondary sources. The theoretical background for the study is the utilitarian theory that espouses the pleasure or happiness of the greater number over that of the lesser number. The inability of government to provide governance and implement health policies and programmes, inadequate budgetary provision for health sector and pervasive corruption, lack of rural developmental programmes, and absence of qualified health personnel are some avenues politics has negatively impacted health care delivery in Nigeria. This has tremendous effects on the country in terms of national development, which is largely dependent on a healthy and strong population, and loss of revenue through medical tourism. To remedy the situation, it was recommended among others that there should be improved funding of health sector, as well as the political will and commitment to implement health policies and programmes; improvement of the socio-economic and political situation in the country, and a legislation banning medical tourism by government officials.

Keywords: politics, health, healthcare delivery

Introduction

The desire for good health is one of the basic needs of man and the society, beside food, clothing and shelter. This is because the continued existence of human society to a great extent depends on the health status of its members, and the fact that no country or society can make meaningful progress and development without a healthy population. It is on this premise that Adefolaju (2011) described illness as a sociological issue because apart from the pain the sick suffers, he becomes a liability to his family and well-wishers. This would affect the discharge of their duties and responsibilities to themselves and the society at large, as they would give more time, attention, energy and resources toward ensuring the recovery of their sick one. It results in loss of material resources and man hours that could be channeled towards the economic growth of the individual and advancement of the country.

The quality of health care available to over 200 million Nigerians, has been of great concern to all, because the provision of quality healthcare that is not only accessible but also affordable, has remained largely unachievable, as well as a controversial one due to the prevailing political, economic and social factors in the country. As a result, governments at different levels in Nigeria have failed in their quest to provide universal healthcare services to her population.

In view of the role of political decisions play in every facet of a nation's life and history, this study attempts to examine how politics and political stakeholders have affected health care delivery in Nigeria, the encumbrances therein, and possibilities of having a better health care system.

Conceptual Clarification

The key concepts around which this topic of discourse revolves, would be contextually clarified for a better understanding. The concepts are politics and healthcare.

The Concept of Politics

The term politics which is synonymous with government is perceived differently by different people. To the layman, it is a vocation or activity people who seek political offices engage in in order to attain political offices or governance. Guda and Mando (2020) referred to politics as a "dirty game" because

of the struggle for power by individuals or groups by all means. It is on this strength that Nwogu (2001) links politics with power, because it places an individual or group of persons in a position to exert authority or influence over others. For Haralambos and Holborn (2008), politics can be seen in the everyday life of the people and in various institutions and organizations like family, education, health, etc., where decisions have to be taken on behalf of others. It is indispensable to man as most of his activities and decisions depend on it.

In democratic settings, political office holders represent the greater population that put them in power, and they are accountable to them. The authority and power associated with offices are held in trust for those that voted them into those positions or offices, thereby conferring some power and authority on them. Decisions made and actions taken should be in the overall best interest of those that vested them with those powers, because undermining the masses could lead to loss of political position through civil interest, revolt or referendum. Politics in this context would not be limited to the activities of government functionaries, but also that of key actors and stakeholders in the health sector.

The Concept of Healthcare Delivery

The term health has been loosely and traditionally used to describe a state that is devoid of illness and without any form of disease, infection or infirmity. This narrow or shallow perception of health only considers the physical state of the individual, thereby relegating his mental, emotional and social state of mind to the background. In a view to give the definition of health a holistic outlook, the World Health Organization, WHO (1948) stated that “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. In other words, it considers not just the prevention and treatment of diseases, but also an individual’s life style, environmental and social factors among others. This state of complete well-being of the individual has attracted much criticism from scholars who consider it not just unrealistic but also utopian in nature (van Druten et al., 2022).

Healthcare delivery is concerned with the patients and the services they receive at health facilities such as diagnosis and treatment. It is the process of providing medical care or services for individuals and communities, and it makes up the most apparent task of the health system to the patients and the society. Effective healthcare delivery involves a comprehensive approach that comprises prevention, detection and treatment. The care provided should not only be accessible, but also affordable and of high quality. Therefore, well trained and motivated personnel, functional infrastructure, facilities and equipment, adequate funding, and latest technologies and innovations in the health sector, among others, are necessary for effective health care system. They would enable the healthcare industry to respond to challenges and opportunities effectively. One salient question on the lips of everyone is “how effective and efficient is healthcare delivery in Nigeria?”

Theoretical Background

This paper is anchored on the theory of utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism: This is a normative ethical theory developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), who championed the maximization of pleasure or happiness over pain. It holds that the rightness or wrongness of action is solely dependent on the outcome or effect of the action on others (Ayotunde, 2018). When an action produces greater pleasure for the greater number (population) it is said to be right. On the other hand, an action is considered wrong if it produces pain, anguish and suffering for the greater majority. With an estimated population of over 200 million, a greater percentage of Nigerians lack access to quality and affordable health care, while a minute percentage that make up the political class at all levels of government can afford the best health services within and outside the country at the expense of the masses, who have no choice but to rely on the inefficient healthcare industry in Nigeria. The actions of the ruling class, have in no small measure plunged the healthcare industry into a pitiable state of comatose, making it difficult for it to provide universal health coverage for Nigerians. This practice negates the utilitarian principle, as it does not make for the happiness or pleasure of the masses, rather it subjects them to anguish and untold hardship.

Historical Overview of Healthcare in Nigeria

Prior to the arrival of European missionaries, the various kingdoms and empires that made up Nigeria were renowned for their cultural and religious practices which included traditional or indigenous or medicine. This includes the local birth attendants, herbalists, and local healers, etc. Traditional medicine which is as old as man depended on the use of materials sourced from the immediate environment to prevent and treat illness (Adefolaju, 2014). It entails the use of plants and animal extracts to provide cure for various illness. This health system which is still being practised today is closely linked to superstitious beliefs and conjecturing (Ibrahim & Olaitan, 2022) because it lacked empirical and scientific explanations. It has however continued to enjoyed large patronage because traditional health practitioners are readily available in the neighbourhoods. The efficacy of traditional health services in Nigeria was never in doubt as it provided cure and healing for the sick.

Orthodox health services in Nigeria was introduced by the missionaries who used religion and education to bring about the relegation of the traditional healthcare to the background. Most indigenous health practices were condemned by the missionaries because they were regarded as evil and unchristian (Adefolaju, 2014). Provision of health care for sick converts especially women and children also served as a means of evangelism. The establishment of hospitals and clinics by the missionaries did not achieve much as the scope of services provided was quite limited and available to a small segment of the society. With time, orthodox medicine gained popularity and gained wide spread acceptability because the diagnoses were accurate and the style of treatment and cure (Agbiji & Landman, 2014). The cost of accessing such healthcare service is something most Nigerians cannot afford, hence the continued reliance on traditional or indigenous medicine.

Politics and Healthcare in Nigeria

All over the world, politics to a great extent, affects every facet of a country's existence. This is even worst in Nigeria where everything including the health and life of her citizens are politicized. The situation is more worrisome considering the fact that Nigeria practises a democratic system of government that should be responsive and responsible to the needs of her citizens. This accounts for the large health inequality prevalent in the country, especially in the rural communities. Politics can affect healthcare delivery in Nigeria in the following ways:

1. **Governance and Policy Implementation-** Governance refers to the methods used to control and manage the various sectors of a country. This includes deciding the sectors or ministries that should be given greater priority or attention, while formulating the necessary policies to meet the policy thrust of the government. It is not limited to the protection of lives and property, provision of power, transportation, education, and quality healthcare, among others. The importance of governance cannot be over emphasized as it engenders the actualization of the potentialities of the nation through collective decisions, formulation of all inclusive policies that have far reaching effects on the people, and effective utilization of scarce resources.

The enactment of the National Health Act in 2014 and the National Health Promotion Policy which was formulated in 2006 and revised in 2019, were designed to provide universal health coverage for Nigerians. The level of success recorded so far in this direction leaves much to be desired as the realities of health inequality continue to stare Nigerians in the face. Government at all levels has not exhibited sufficient commitment to implement these policies to the letter, especially at the local government level. The health system has remained regrettably weak, and perpetually ineffective and inaccessible. The appointment those who oversee the various aspects of these policies are based on ethnic, religious or political affiliation, overlooking those who are eminently qualified for such positions. This amounts to putting a round peg in a square hole, as such inefficiency has remained the order of the day.

Again, the formulation of every policy is usually done within a political context and this according to Bamba et al. (2005) spells out what is and what is not feasible or admissible. As a result, a change in leadership could lead to the abandonment of the programmes and policies of the previous regime, for new ones that would require substantial time and resources to come into effect. This has been the situation with Nigeria where policies and programmes are not sustained because there is no long term health development blueprint that every government that comes into office keys into. It is also instructive to point out that some decisions of government have done

much harm than good to the health sector. For example, the suspension of polio vaccination programme by the governors of Kano, Kaduna and Zamfara States worsened the polio situation in Nigeria.

2. **Finance:** Effective implementation of health policies and programmes, and by extension the provision of universal health coverage for Nigerians depends largely on the availability and effective utilization of funds. Funding is necessary for provision of health facilities, medical consumables, remuneration of health workers, funding of research institutes, among others. It is on this premise that countries are expected to spend a large part of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on healthcare (Yunusa et al., 2014). This is because of the positive association between economic growth of any country and the state of health of her citizens. Unfortunately, the budgetary provisions for the 2023 budget is 5.75% of the total budget, which falls short of the 15% budget commitment of African leaders to address the deficiencies in their health systems. This ugly situation if not curbed will make the actualization of quality health for all elusive and unattainable.

Also, corruption which is pervasive in every sector of Nigeria is another clog in the wheel of progress towards improving the healthcare delivery. Effective utilization of available resources, no matter how little it is, would bring about little improvement in health care delivery, even though it could be seen as small or insignificant. The practice of transparency, probity and accountability, over the years would have harnessed the available resources to put in place something better than what is obtainable in the health sector. Until the federal and state ministries of health, and management of the various health facilities (especially secondary and tertiary) purge themselves of fraud and financial misconduct, health sector would remain perpetually in its poor state. This situation can only change if government shows strong political will and commitment to fight corruption from within and without, irrespective of political leaning, and ethnic and religious sentiments.

3. **Rural-Urban dichotomy and Development:** Rural-Urban dichotomy to some extent influences government development programmes in Nigeria. This situation also affects the location of key government projects like healthcare facilities, among others. The urban areas boast of more health care facilities, both private and public, especially the secondary and tertiary healthcare centres which provides more specialized and referral services. It creates a situation where urban dwellers have better access to healthcare services, though not free, unlike their rural counterparts, who may have nothing more than the primary health care at their disposal. The geographical disparities would in most cases require rural dwellers to take the risk of making long, exhaustive and expensive journeys on bad roads, to access better healthcare services in the urban areas. The health outcomes for these two areas would certainly not be the same, because of the advantages urban areas has over rural areas. A robust rural development programme would encourage the siting of more health facilities in rural areas thereby improving health outcomes.
4. **Manpower:** No healthcare system can function effectively without adequate qualified health personnel to run the various health facilities, who should work in synergy with stakeholders, government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to implement the health policies and programmes. Unfortunately, there is a serious dearth of manpower in the health sector in Nigeria. This can be attributed to the absence of a recruitment framework that would ensure immediate replacement in the event of retirement or death. Importantly, the poor conditions of service in Nigeria have led to brain drain in search of greener pastures and better working conditions overseas. Government policies and the socio-economic conditions in the country have contributed in no small measure to making the health sector to be grossly understaffed and obviously unable to provide the requisite health care service delivery. Again, the location of secondary and tertiary healthcare facilities in urban areas also affects the distribution of health personnel in the country, since some of these healthcare facilities are sited in urban or developing areas. The posting of health workforce according to the location of these facilities, gives urban areas some advantage over rural areas, thereby creating a situation where

the urban areas enjoy better facilities and personnel at the expense of others (Okpani & Abimbola, 2015). This situation is worsened by lack of incentives and special allowances for rural health personnel, which would encourage those posted to such areas to stay instead of lobbying for posting to urban centres.

Implication of Politics of health Delivery for Nigeria

From the foregoing discussions, it is crystal clear that politics has done much harm than good to health care delivery in Nigeria, which has impacted the nation in the following ways:

1. **National Development:** Attainment of development is the goal of every government that has the interest of her citizens at heart by improving on their well-being. This is only possible when the citizens are able to discharge their duties and responsibilities as expected of them. It is difficult for a nation to grow or make meaningful progress if her citizens are not healthy and strong (Osibogun, 2020). This will enable them to perform their expected roles affectively, as it would result in decreased productivity and efficiency.
2. **Medical Tourism:** A dysfunctional health sector would not be able to meet the health needs and challenges of the people, rather it would make them to seek medical help outside the shores of the country. This would consequently result in loss of revenue on the one hand, and on the other hand contributing to the revenue generation of foreign countries. This ugly situation as elucidated by Zhang et al. (2022), makes the healthcare industry of the foreign countries to experience improvement and provide better services for the consumers, thereby improving their economy and enhancing their gross domestic product (GDP). Investments in the healthcare delivery would ensure the availability of state of the art facilities, qualified health personnel and better services (Alvarez et al., 2013). This would make Nigeria a choice destination for medical tourism and contribute to her economy by stemming the trend of medical tourism by the ruling class.
3. **Human capital Flight:** Nigeria has lost some of her best medical personnel to other countries due to obnoxious government policies, insecurity and the harsh socio-economic situation in the country. These factors which usually have political undertone have made highly skilled nurses, physicians and other ancillary health practitioners, to seek better opportunities and improved working conditions in other countries where they would bring their training, experience and expertise to bear, while robbing Nigeria of their services. It is in the light of the above that Okoro et al., (2014) submitted that capital flight results in a steady decrease in the economic growth of developing countries. It can therefore be argued that the sustained decline in the overall development of Nigeria is partly due to the loss of eminently qualified personnel to other countries.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine politics and healthcare delivery in Nigeria, and how it affects the inalienable rights of her citizens to affordable and accessible healthcare. Political decisions have contributed in widening the health inequality in the country, as the lower and middle classes find it difficult to access quality healthcare services. This is largely as a result of the inability of the political class who superintend over the affairs of the country, to take deliberate actions that would directly or indirectly improve the health sector and make it more efficient and effective. This has profound implications for sustainable national development which has been a major policy thrust of the federal government in recent years. It is therefore a call for action for government at all levels, as it is only a healthy and vibrant population that can drive the development agenda of government, improve the economy of the country and enhance the living conditions of the people.

Recommendations

Based on the issues raised and analyzed concerning politics and healthcare delivery in Nigeria, recommendations for change to improve healthcare delivery are made as follows:

1. The political class should see themselves as servants whose duty is to improve the welfare of the citizens and their living conditions, rather than seeing themselves as rulers who should be served

- with the resources of the nation at the expense of the masses. This would ensure that governance and its dividends such as quality and affordable healthcare delivery is provided the citizens.
2. Government at all levels should show sufficient commitment and strong political will to implement health policies and programmes. This would be achieved by ensuring that there is improved funding, upgrading of healthcare facilities, and provision of eminently qualified, well-motivated and committed medical personnel.
 3. Interference in the activities of anti-graft agencies such as Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) should be discouraged, to enable them investigate and prosecute corrupt officials of Ministries of Health and heads of tertiary health facilities. It would serve as a deterrent to other corrupt officials.
 4. There should be a deliberate rural development programme by government as it would go a long way in discouraging health personnel posted to rural areas from seeking transfer to urban centres where there are basic amenities like electricity, pipe born water, roads schools, etc.
 5. The socio-economic and political conditions in the country should be improved upon so as to stem the ugly trend of human capital flight which has robbed Nigeria of the services of some of the best brains in the healthcare sector.
 6. A stringent legislation should be enacted against medical tourism by top government functionaries and their families, so that the ruling class would see the urgent need to address the health inequality in the country and improve the economy of Nigeria by saving the huge amount spent on medical tourism.

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