

Can Social Media Bridge the Information Gap in Africa and Improve Early Diagnosis of Glaucoma by Improving Health Seeking Behaviour?

Sir,

Glaucoma is the leading cause of irreversible blindness worldwide and is most prevalent in people of African descent. About 6 million people have glaucoma, and up to half a million of them are already blind in Africa. Glaucoma has an earlier onset in Africans and is more aggressive in its course. As a result, it causes blindness earlier than in Caucasian counterparts.^[1]

A progressive optic neuropathy that the science of medicine has yet to find a cure for, the management of glaucoma is aimed at preventing progression rather than attaining a cure.

Early diagnosis and prompt institution of treatment remain the best ways to manage this disease.

Early diagnosis is only possible with good health-seeking behaviour and an enlightened population. The economic burden of blindness caused by this disease further perpetuates an existing problem of poverty in Africa and other underserved communities. Not only does it reduce the quality of life of the patient, but it also increases the dependency ratio of the said population.

With poor government funding in healthcare in Africa, the paradigm of public health needs to shift towards the effective use of methods of sharing information that have taken the 21st century by storm. This is, of course, the mobile phone. The world has become a global village, and access to smart phones has massively changed the dynamics of life today.

The World Bank and African Development Bank **report that there are 650 million mobile users in Africa, surpassing the number in the United States or Europe.** In some African countries, more people have access to a mobile phone than to clean water, a bank account or electricity, the agencies add.^[2]

Africa's unique demographic layout points to a group of people that can be utilized to pass information. Africa is said to be the continent with the youngest population worldwide. As of 2021, around 40% of the population was aged 15 years and younger, compared to a global average of 26%.^[3]

The youth have always been agents of societal change. Current trends in the use of technology by this group of people strongly point towards the benefit of arming them with information about glaucoma. What better way to utilize this

use of technology than to use social media to spread awareness?

Statistics show that there were 3.78 billion social media users worldwide in 2021, and this number was expected to continue growing over the next few years (Statista, 2020). As it stands, that equates to about 48% of the current world population.^[4]

Also, it is estimated that **internet penetration in Africa in 2022 will be as high as 43%, with an estimated Facebook usage of over 250 million users.** Certain countries in Africa, like Nigeria, have an estimated internet penetration of as high as 73%.^[5]

What is the interpretation of this data and its public health importance with regard to glaucoma? The simple answer is that these figures point to an underused means of mass sensitization of the population to a disease that is a major public health concern.

A focused and organized social media campaign has the capacity to save the sight of millions in Africa. Short video clips in multiple languages and simplified terms discussing this disease and encouraging the populace to get screened could change the narrative of not only glaucoma but many other diseases in underserved communities. A 2-minute jingle may be the reason someone in a remote village recognizes the haloes or tunnel vision of glaucoma and presents it to the nearest health facility.

The belief is that this strategic move will result in a geometric increase in health seeking behaviour, which will translate into early presentation, thereby improving prognosis and redefining the public health and economic burden of this disease.

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To the gift of family, whose love makes us whole and to the millions of people that have lost sight to glaucoma.

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