



Communique

of the

5th National Conference on Environment & Health

13-14 October, 2020

Theme:

"Combatting Environmental and Occupational Cancers"

An initiative of the

LivingScience Foundation, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

COMMUNIQUE OF THE 5TH NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

13-14 October, 2020

"At least 7 million lives could be saved over the next decade, by identifying the most appropriate science for each country situation, by basing strong cancer responses on universal health coverage, and by mobilizing different stakeholders to work together"

- Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, WHO, Feb, 2020.
(www.who.int/news/item/04-02-2020-who-outlines-steps-to-save-7-million-lives-from cancer)

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The fifth National Conference on Environment and Health organized by the LivingScience Foundation, Ile-Ife held at the Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State on the 13th and 14th October, 2020. It was also hosted on Google Meet platform for online participation. The Conference had earlier been scheduled for April 14-15, but had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 lockdown that was announced close to the original scheduled date. The theme of the Conference was: *COMBATTING ENVIRONMENTAL AND OCCUPATIONAL CANCERS IN NIGERIA*. The Conference had representations from various Sectors of the Nigerian society, including the Academia, Government Regulators, Practitioners, NGOs, and the Media. Principal collaborators were the Redeemer's University, Ede; Osun Health Insurance Agency, Osogbo; Environ Lab, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA), South West Zone; and the Environmental Health Officers Association of Nigeria, Osun State Chapter.

Two Keynote addresses were presented. The first, (MAJOR AGENTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND OCCUPATIONAL CANCERS IN NIGERIA) was presented on-site by Prof M.K.C. Sridhar of the Department of Environmental Health, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Ibadan; while the second, (INNOVATIVE RESOURCE MOBILISATION IN ADDRESSING THE MENACE OF CANCERS IN NIGERIA) was presented online by Prof Mohammed Nasir Sambo, the Executive Secretary and Chief Executive Officer of the Nigerian Health Insurance Scheme, Abuja. The Vice Chancellor of the Redeemer's University, Prof Anthony E. Akinlo was represented at the opening ceremony by Professor Emmanuel Unuabonah, the Director of Academic Planning as well as Coordinator of the Africa Centre of Excellence – Water (ACE-Water) of the University. Pastor Elijah Udofia, the South West Coordinator of the NESREA delivered a goodwill message to the Conference on behalf of the Director General of the Agency, Prof Aliyu Jauro. A total of forty-five institutions/departments were represented in the Abstracts sent in for the conference.

The technical business was conducted in seven sessions over the two days. Other key events included a Secondary Schools Challenge where Proposals for innovative syntheses of biopesticides from homegrown locally-sourced materials, submitted by five invited secondary schools were assessed. Representatives of the top three schools (Adeleke University High School, Ede, Osogbo Government High School, Osogbo, and Sterling Integrated International School, Ilesa, respectively) were invited to the opening ceremony. The announcement of the 2020 winner of the annual A.F. Oluwole Prize instituted in honour of Emeritus Professor Abiodun F. Oluwole (NNOM) was however deferred as the assessment process could not be completed on time due to the tight and uncertain schedules leading to the Conference. The Prize recognizes and honours an individual or corporate organization who has made notable sacrificial contributions in the environment-health sector towards the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria in the preceding year. The winner of the Prize for 2020 is expected to be announced before the end of the year.

Also featured during the Conference (on Wednesday 14th October) was a Discussion Panel examining the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Osun State, Nigeria. Both positive and negative fall-outs from the pandemic were highlighted, and vital lessons needed to strengthen health infrastructure and systems in Nigeria were pointed out. The two discussants, Dr A.S. Oginni and Dr (Sanitarian) Tope Akinwunmi, were both key members of the Osun State COVID-19 response team. The discussion was moderated by Dr (Mrs) Beatrice Emma-Okon, the Head of the Medical Biochemistry Department at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

During the lunchtime on Wednesday 14th, an impromptu research collaboration meeting was convened in response to the strident calls for collaboration by participants during the presentations. The basics of the pilot research proposal (tentatively titled Leveraging Artificial Intelligence for identification of Environmental Indicators for Cancers in Osun State, Nigeria) is to be further discussed after the Conference and appropriate sponsors sought to fund the implementation.

Below are the key observations made in course of the Conference, and the recommended actions suggested in the environment-health sector in order to enhance public health and ensure overall sustainable development in Nigeria:

1. The Conference noted that the burden of cancer is unacceptably high in Nigeria; and there is an urgent need to holistically address the menace. For example, available figures from the Global Health Burden report published in July 2019 indicated that Nigeria had the unenviable record of being the highest contributor of Disability Adjusted Lifetime Years (DALY) in the world to the global burden of childhood and adolescent cancer in 2017,

   Delegates commended the theme and timing of the 5th National Conference on Environment and Health as apposite; and urged that the Communique be widely circulated to relevant stakeholders.

2. As bad as the quoted figures for the cancer burden in Nigeria are, the Conference recognized that they probably are underreported due to the absence of functional and effective national population-based cancer registries. Currently available statistics are obtained largely from hospital-based registries and they suffer the added shortcoming of not recording sufficient demographical data of the subjects that could permit robust scientific investigations that could uncover trends and patterns that might help in the design of appropriate preventive actions and policies against Cancers in Nigeria.

   Conference recommends the establishment and adequate funding of comprehensive population-based cancer registries employing computerized databases in the country.

3. Conference noted the considerable inequalities that exist in Cancer prevention and management globally. According to data presented at the Conference based on the 2020 World Cancer Report released by the WHO in February 2020, if current trends persist, the world can expect to see a 60% increase in cancer cases over the next two decades. However the estimated increase specifically in low- and middle-income (LMIC) countries such as Nigeria over the same period will be a whopping 81%! Similarly, Cancer survival rates are lowest in the same high-incidence LMIC countries due to a combination of factors including virtually non-existent local research on primary prevention of cancer, weak regulatory and monitoring activities by poorly funded government agencies, dearth of human resources and infrastructure to provide timely medical interventions, among others.

   Conference strongly recommends that Nigeria prioritize primary prevention efforts focusing on reducing risk factors for cancer for identified vulnerable subgroups of the population, as well as improvements in early detection - linked to timely treatment, to address the needs of the millions of people who will still go on to develop cancers.

4. Conference noted that the above ugly situation is further compounded by local inequalities associated with availability and affordability of cancer treatment in Nigeria. Cited from the OAUTHC was a typical figure of N2,050,050 for a 26-week treatment, while the waiting list for radiotherapy at the few functioning centres could translate to several months delay of urgently required treatment. Conference noted that the Basic Health Care Provision Fund – Basic Minimum Package of Healthcare Services (BHCPF - BMPHS) currently conspicuously excludes treatment and care for cancers.

   Conference further noted that the WHO Cancer Report 2020 specifically advocates that cancers be included in national Universal Health Coverage funding. Conference strongly endorsed this recommendation by the World Health Organization, noting that such inclusion of treatment and care for cancers can be done in phases as more innovative sources of revenue mobilisation to the BHCPF are developed and implemented.

   In this regard, Conference strongly commended the efforts by the NHIS in her ongoing search for innovative methods to fund cancer management within the social health insurance framework. Likewise the OHIS is commended for prudent management of available resources that has placed her at the forefront of the Social Health Insurance enterprise at the state level in Nigeria. Conference urges these and similar organizations to seriously consider sponsoring basic research into primary prevention of cancers.

5. Conference noted that apart from the more well-recognized environmental carcinogens such as tobacco, pesticides, and industrial pollutants, other equally established carcinogens, (and perhaps with even wider exposure to the general population) are largely underplayed or totally unrecognized by the general public. These include: air pollution from the transport sector, infectious agents such as helicobacter pylori (implicated in stomach cancer), alcohol consumption, hormonal contraceptives (used every day by at least 100 million women worldwide for prolonged periods and now classified as Group 1 carcinogens), and microwave radiation associated with cell phones and Base Trans-receiver Stations.

   Conference calls for much more aggressive and intensive public education on commonly-occurring carcinogens and the vulnerable sub-population groups affected, noting the cost-effectiveness of such efforts. Appropriate warning labels should also be placed on qualifying products to further help the general public.

6. In addition to the actions suggested above, Conference urges the Federal and State ministries of health and of environment to commission systematic research efforts to identify and officially designate other less-known carcinogens occurring in common household products and in workplaces. The exposure pathways into the different vulnerable subpopulation groups should also be identified, and appropriate control measures (viz elimination, substitution, engineering controls, administrative controls, worker/public education, and personal protection equipment) recommended - all within the context of sustainable development.

7. As acknowledged in the World Cancer Report 2020, increasing awareness of environmental carcinogens and concomitant heightened regulatory activities in the developed countries is "resulting in the relocation of certain industrial processes to low-income countries, increasingly exposing the local population to carcinogenic products or waste".

   The Conference concurs with the WHO recommendation that "international cooperation is needed to redress this phenomenon;" and calls on the newly inaugurated National Working Group on Cancer Prevention in Nigeria to follow up with the WHO in promoting and actualizing such cooperation.

8. Conference noted that the exposome approaches to research on environment and cancer are now becoming feasible as a result of extensive technological advances that has opened up new opportunities to collect and analyse large data sets, integrating information on the external environment (contaminants, lifestyle factors, diet, socioeconomic status, etc.) and the internal environment (biological factors such as genetic and metabolic factors) to design and promote effective preventive actions and policies.

   Conference strongly recommends that the Federal Ministries of Health and Environment recognize this approach in the appropriate National Action Plans, and commission interdisciplinary collaborative research leveraging on Big data science and Area-wide Association studies to address the menace of cancers and other non-communicable diseases in Nigeria.

9. Conference recognized basic sanitation and hygiene as a potent primary means of dealing with NCDs in general and Cancers in particular. One clear lesson learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic is the existence of a strong nexus between infectious diseases and NCDs. Not only can infectious diseases adversely affect the resources available to address NCDs, it was evident that adverse outcomes of infectious diseases could be significantly exacerbated by underlying co-existing NCDs. The vast majority of mortality from COVID-19 is from people with co-morbidity caused by NCDs.

Conference therefore recommended the strengthening of the training and deployment of Environmental Health Officers, and commends the educational institutions now offering degrees on the subject matter.

10. The Conference noted a number of positive and negative impacts of COVID-19 on the health, social, and economic sectors in Nigeria. Considering Osun State in particular, it was noted that the response was not robust enough despite the State's performance which was adjudged higher than the national average. Specific lapses and weaknesses in systems and structures were identified.

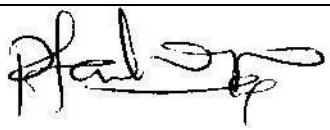
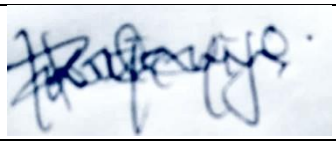
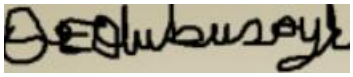
    The Conference therefore recommends that the nation endeavour to preserve in institutional memory, the hard lessons learnt and systemic failures in the response to COVID-19. It further counselled that facilities and infrastructure that were acquired in a "fire-brigade" fashion in the wake of the COVID-19 should be taken care of and not left for looting.

11. The Conference noted that tangible fruits will be difficult to produce in primary prevention of cancers, unless there are meaningful inter-sectoral collaborations. To this end, a research proposal was jointly discussed among participants spanning all the key sectors represented at the Conference. Titled Leveraging Artificial Intelligence for identification of Environmental Indicators for Cancers in Nigeria, funding is to be sought primarily from local philanthropists, while the participating centres will make their contributions via non-fiscal option.

12. Conference commends the LivingScience Foundation for the vision of forging inter-sectoral collaborations to tackle the most-relevant environment-health challenges in the country using home-grown solutions. Conference acknowledges the considerable sacrifices this entails especially in a period of prevailing socio-economic turmoils; and thanks the Organization and her various Partners for their efforts.

Ile-Ife, 22nd October, 2020.

Signed by key sectoral stakeholders at the Conference

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