

Combating infodemics: Evaluating the role of accurate health reporting during Lassa fever outbreaks in West Africa

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Introduction

Lassa Fever is endemic in West Africa, with an estimated 100,000–300,000 infections and up to 5,000 deaths recorded annually. Despite improved disease surveillance, the public health response continues to be undermined by widespread misinformation, which erodes trust and delays health-seeking behaviour. This study investigates how accurate media reporting influences public perception, trust, and behavioural responses during Lassa Fever outbreaks in Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

Methods

A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted. A total of 180 media items were subjected to content analysis. In-depth interviews (n=25) were conducted with health journalists and public health communication officers, alongside structured surveys involving 300 community members. Media content was assessed based on timeliness, completeness, accuracy, and citation of trusted sources. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 26, while qualitative data were coded using NVivo 12, guided by the Health Belief Model and the Diffusion of Innovations framework.

Results

Sixty-five per cent of media reports aligned with official public health guidance; however, only 40% cited verified expert sources. Local radio was the

most trusted medium, particularly in rural settings. Identified barriers included limited access to real-time outbreak data, inadequate journalist training, and the pervasive spread of misinformation through social media. Nearly half of the surveyed community members recalled encountering false claims, including those linking Lassa Fever to spiritual causes or herbal remedies.

Conclusion

Media remain a vital platform for outbreak communication but require improved coordination with health authorities and capacity strengthening. Proactive infodemic management, culturally adapted messaging, and strategic engagement with trusted local communicators are critical for enhancing the effectiveness of Lassa Fever response efforts.