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Understanding community beliefs, misinformation, and behaviour: A social and behavioural science lens on Lassa fever prevention in Nigeria

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Introduction

The incidence of Lassa fever (LF) in the last decade in West African countries have been on the increase. In Nigeria, LF have become endemic leading to increased fatalities among health care providers. Bauchi state, Nigeria have witnessed more frequent outbreaks, becoming one of the high-risk states. Despite LF's endemic nature, many communities remain reactive rather than proactive in their approach to LF outbreaks. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive understanding of community perceptions and misinformation needed for designing effective and context specific disease prevention strategies.

Methods

The study sites comprise of selected communities where intervention was implemented in two (Bauchi and Toro) local government areas (LGAs) and one control LGA (Dambam) using a quasi-experimental study design. The Socio Ecological Model based on behavioral method was applied to assess the impact of risk communication and community engagement interventions on knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to LF in Bauchi State, Nigeria. Data was collected using structured interviews with 1,544 adult community members and analyzed using Stata, version 17.

Results

Findings revealed that LF knowledge among community members varies, with higher awareness in Bauchi and Toro compared to Dambam LGA. Despite this, a significant proportion of respondents are still engaged in high-risk practices like open-air drying. Positive attitudes towards LF elimination were noted in intervention LGAs, emphasizing community support and reporting suspected cases to authorities. Nonetheless, socioeconomic obstacles and ongoing misinformation, including the notions that LF is a result of witchcraft or a government conspiracy, persist in obstructing complete community adherence. Communication channels for LF information included radio, healthcare workers, and friends/family members, with radio and friends/family members being the preferred channels.

Conclusion

The study emphasizes the significance of culturally grounded communication and behavioral insights in promoting sustainable change and building trust in community-based disease prevention strategies in low-resource settings.