

Leveraging private sector community health providers to improve outbreak preparedness, prevention and response: Lessons from the IntegratE Project in Nigeria

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Introduction

Community engagement is critical in promoting awareness, dispelling myths, and strengthening outbreak preparedness and response. In Nigerian communities, private sector providers, particularly Community Pharmacists (CPs) and Patent and Proprietary Medicine Vendors (PPMVs), serve as the first point of healthcare contact. The IntegratE project, implemented by Society for Family Health, has trained and supported them to deliver quality family planning (FP) and primary healthcare (PHC) services. This study explores how lessons from the IntegratE private sector model can be adapted to empower communities in preventing and responding to Lassa fever and other viral hemorrhagic fevers outbreaks.

Methods

The IntegratE project adopted a multi-layered approach involving capacity building, demand generation, and strategic community engagement in 11 Nigerian States from 2017 to 2024. Over 5,200 CPs and PPMVs were trained in interpersonal communication, counselling, referral, health promotion and data reporting, particularly in FP and maternal-child health services. This abstract proposes the adaptation of this methodology, particularly the role of trusted CPs and PPMVs to Lassa fever prevention through early warning

systems, community-based surveillance, counselling and targeted risk communication.

Results

Evidence from the IntegratE project indicates increased FP awareness and uptake, improved health-seeking behaviour, reduced misconceptions and growing trust in private sector healthcare providers among underserved populations. Over 834,523 women accessed FP through these trained providers, with about 33% (274,013) being new clients, who may not have accessed FP if the providers were not trained. Also, over 551,306 children seen for various PHC services, including malaria, pneumonia, diarrhoea, tuberculosis and malnutrition.

Conclusion

The IntegratE project demonstrates that empowering trusted private sector providers can improve community health outcomes. Integrating CPs and PPMVs into Lassa fever response frameworks can enhance early detection, promote timely disease reporting, encourage behavioural change, improve community engagement, reduce Lassa fever myths and stigma and contribute to more resilient health systems.