

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS IN TERTIARY HEALTH INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA: A LOOK AT CHALLENGES**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the challenges faced by public relations in tertiary health institutions in Nigeria. The paper used desk review to gather data and found out that public relation in Nigeria's tertiary health institutions has been limited by challenges like inadequate funding, quacks and misconception among other challenges. The paper concludes that public relations in Nigeria are facing challenges that appear to be the reason for its ineffectiveness in most health institutions. The paper suggests that management of health institutions should employ qualified staff who are either PR professionals or are trained in the field of mass communication. Again Public relations department in tertiary health institutions should be adequately funded by the management so that they can be effective in the discharge of their duties.*

**Keywords: public relations, tertiary health institutions, challenges, Nigeria.**

### **Introduction**

Currently, there are significant public relations' challenges faced by tertiary health institutions in Nigeria, which has greatly tarnished their reputation. These issues encompass a variety of problems such as ineffective communication between doctors and patients, de-motivated staff, inadequate equipment, and various other shortcomings. Patients visiting these hospitals often encounter excessive waiting times, unhelpful non-medical staff, and a lack of clear service points. These issues directly impact the public's perception of these institutions and require the attention of public relations expert to implement strategies for resolution.

However, it is important to acknowledge that public relations efforts in Nigeria's tertiary health institutions face certain limitations. These limitations hinder the ability to effectively address the aforementioned image-related problems. Despite hospitals being places where individuals seek comfort and care for their health, the current state of affairs in these institutions fails to provide the desired level of support and satisfaction to patients.

Public relations has become an antidote for so many organizational issues. This is because the profession is equipped with strategies like: effective community relations, effective media relations, crisis communication management, corporate social responsibility, effective corporate advertising and rebranding among others as stated by Akase, Asemmah and Nkwam-uwaoma (2018). These strategies can help an organization, government or individuals thrive in the face of today's uncertain, unpredictable and complex society characterized by educated publics. Education and exposures have made the public to become

increasingly unsatisfied with provided services. This is because they are disposed to so many service providers and have developed taste for high quality services.

Furthermore, having observed that the society has become complex, it appears that tertiary health institutions in Nigeria have failed to adopt good public relations that will meet the needs of their ever-evolving publics most especially the patients. Some of these needs relate to patients satisfaction which according to Esatoglu, Tengilimoglu and Parsons (2004), Public relations departments can help to highlight areas of patients' satisfaction which can be use this as a direct or indirect measure of outcome to influence the surrounding community. However, it should be quickly noted that, just like any other profession, public relations have its peculiar challenges which could account for its ineffectiveness in so many tertiary health institutions in Nigeria. In this regard, this paper will unveil some challenges faced by public relations in Nigerian tertiary health institutions.

### **Objective**

The paper shall explore the challenges of public relations in tertiary health institutions in Nigeria.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Conceptual Clarification**

##### **Public Relations**

In defining public relations it is important to note that the discipline has a global recognition which is why the Federal government of Nigeria raised it to the status of a regulatory body under decree no.16 (now act of parliament) in 1990 establishing the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). In this regard, scholars have presented so many definitions of the concept as it fits their context or demands. According Abbas (2007), "public relations is a mutual informed attempt which organisations and relevant social groups make to meet society's acceptable objectives through communication and reaching a common understanding among communication parties." Also, Public Relations Institute of Australia (2016) says it is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between organization (or individual) and its (or their) publics.

Also, in the words of Joseph (2017), public relations is an applied social and behavioural science that assists management in defining organisation's objectives for increasing public understanding and acceptance of the organization's products (goods or services), plans, policies and personnel. Put differently, it is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interests and executes a program of action to earn mutual understanding and acceptance. The above definitions have different approaches to defining public relations but ultimately, they all attribute public relations to establishing mutual relationship and they all emphasized communication as a tool of achieving that.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, public relations is recognized globally which is consequent upon its functions. Also, from the definition presented by Owobu (2011), public relations is seen as a "management function" the other two definitions by Abbas (2007) and Public Relations Institute of Australia (2016) stressed public relations function as it affects

establishing mutual relationship and acceptability. However, the functions of public relations are not restricted to the ones captured above. In that regards, National Open University (2006), state the functions of public relations as: Writing and editing, Mass Production, Media relations, Research, Strategic planning, Corporate counseling, Organising special events, Speaking, and Crisis Communication,

### **Health institutions**

According to Nwakaze and Kandala (2011), [medical institution](#) means an approved, accredited, or licensed public or non-profit institution, facility, or organization whose primary function is the furnishing of public health and medical services to the public or promoting public health through the conduct of research, experiments, training, or demonstrations related to cause, prevention, and methods of diagnosis and treatment of diseases and injuries. According to Ahamadi-Javid, Seyedi and Sayam (2012), health institutions in general, are any location where health care is provided. Health institutions range from small clinics and doctor's offices to urgent care centres and large hospitals with elaborate emergency rooms and trauma centres.

Oladejo (2014), states that tertiary healthcare facilities are referral centres, receiving referrals from secondary and primary healthcare centres. They provide the most specialized healthcare administered to patients with complex diseases who may require high risk medical and surgical procedures with high cost technological resource. Tertiary healthcare is provided mostly in university teaching hospitals and specialized hospitals. It requires sophisticated medical technology, multiple specialists and subspecialists, a diagnostic support group and intensive care facility. In developing countries like Nigeria, tertiary healthcare facilities are usually congested and overcrowded because of the volume of patients admitted.

Furthermore, whether a hospital is a primary or tertiary health institution, they function to provide health care services. According to Brain (2015), the main function of a hospital is to provide the population with complete health care; it also functions as the centre for the training of health workers. Amin (2016) added that, hospital provide the population complete healthcare, both curative and preventive. The hospital is also a centre for the training of health workers and for bio-social research.

### **Public Relations in Health Institutions**

Public relations has become popular globally. The popularity accrued from it numerous benefits to organizations and individuals who recognized and have benefited from its pool of advantages. Hospitals are essential part of the social structure. Even though hospitals render essential services, they deal with various publics. In doing so, there are bound to be conflicts that may affect the image of the hospitals. In this regard hospitals need a communication expert to maintain good relationship between the hospital and its public which is the public relations person. According to Zoran, Tomic and Zoran (2010), Viewed through the history of public relations in health care, good time of health PR was between the 1950 and 1960. During this time, practitioners in public relations in the health care felt little need to create awareness and preference for health care because health care organizations have always had the support and sympathy of the public. PR did not have to be particularly active in order to "maintain and build public confidence." Rather, the role of public relations was attributed and limited

to the communication of the information and positive image. According to Traynowicz-Hetherington, Ekachai and Parkinson (2001), during the 1970 there was a shift in the expression in health sector. As a result, marketing department in the health organizations got greater responsibilities. The traditional role of public relations, promotion of a positive image and the appropriate transfer of news, graduated to development of strategies on how to deal with new levels of consumer criticism and training of internal public on teamwork. From 1970-1980 in the U.S., Doctors were slowly losing control of the health system in relation to the mistakes. Constant pressure, forced hospital managers to seek professional public relations and communication professionals to maintain two-way communication between hospitals or health organizations and their public.

Looking at public relations from the management point of view, no organisation can function effectively without an effective public relations department. According to Zoran, Tomic and Zoran (2010), Health care is often described as a complex job in an unsafe future. The practice of public relations in health care has changed together with the dramatic changes in health care. In some sense, public relations in health care are not particularly different with public relations in any other industry given that the overall objective of the public relations is still to “match long-term relationships” and “manage reputation”. However, Traynowicz-Hetherington, Ekachai and Parkinson (2001), identified health care as a unique industry from the stand point that medicine is different from any other industry because of the things at its disposal (life, death and recovery), rapid and profound changes in the health system and the communication between the client (or patient) and suppliers (supplier of health care within the defined system).

As stated above, healthcare is a unique industry but irrespective of its uniqueness, it needs public relations. Public relations is equipped with strategies like communication, media relations, community relations, corporate social responsibility, stake holder relations among other strategies based on a context. These strategies harmoniously worked together to benefit the health institutions in the following ways:

**Creating good image for health institution:** Zoran and Tomic (2010) state that Public relations activities are conducted out of the hospital as well as in the hospitals. Communications like brochures and press releases prepared by the Hospital as public relations activities, media coverage, and campaigns on public health and training are critical on target group perception. Also, patient satisfaction from health care services and patient recommendation can also be formed as a result of the public relations activities conducted. Such recommendations are sometimes more influential than money spent on advertisement. Kirdar (2007), observes that the principal purpose of both public relations and image creating is focusing on customer expectations, ensuring customer satisfaction and increasing the organization’s good relations with its surrounding community and feelings of trust and satisfaction towards the product or service

**Increase Patronage:** Akinci Esatoglu, Tengilimoglu and Parsons (2004) stated that, patients have become better informed and more accountable consumers of health care services and want to become more active participants in decisions regarding the treatment process. The authors further observed that public relations departments can help to highlight areas of

consumer satisfaction like: quality of the medical personnel, quality of emergency services, quality of nursing care, availability of complete set of services, physician's recommendations, access to modern equipment, good environmental and physical conditions and cost of care, then use it as a direct or indirect measure of outcome to influence the surrounding community.

### **Public Relations in health Institutions in Nigeria**

Nigeria's health institutions and professionals have been linked to bad image as noted above. According to Ingwu, Ohaeri and Iroka (2016) there have been negative comments against health professionals daily in the public discuss in Nigeria about some ill characters exhibited by them. The above negative depiction has underscored the need for effective public relations (PR) in health practice among Nigeria health professionals. Such PR will bring about constant creation, shaping and sustenance of our positive image to the profession and the health institution.

However, trying to trace the history of public relations in health institution in Nigeria has proven to be an arduous task as the paper could not locate any material both on line and on some published materials on public relations. Even though the history is not readily available, the practice is still ongoing in health institutions in Nigeria as most of the health institutions have public relations department in their respective health institutions. Also, public relations has helped health institutions in numerous ways. According to the study conducted by Musa (2020) on the assessment of public relations strategies of health institutions: a comparative analysis of Jos university teaching hospital and Federal medical Centre Keffi. Public relations have helped the health institutions in crisis management and maintaining good relations with their various publics. Also, the studies revealed the nature of operation of public relations in some health institutions in Nigeria as mere protocol or glorified messengers who are not allowed to handle the duties of public relations as professionals. This study may not fully capture the nature of public relations in Nigeria giving that the study is restricted to two health institutions within plateau and Nasarawa State respectively. However, it has given a leap into the nature of practice.

Furthermore, some of the public health institutions in Nigeria who are supposed to operate in line with world best practice but are overwhelmed by so many public relations issue. The guardian publication of 15<sup>th</sup> December 2015 reports that "patients' relatives complain of poor services as facilities wear out at Lagos University Teaching Hospital". Daily trust new paper of 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2019, says "ABU teaching hospital: where patients contribute money to fix broken facilities." "Vital equipment shortage hits public teaching hospitals. Punch newspaper 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 2019 reports that "Health sector crisis: patients on bare flours, battles mosquitoes in teaching hospitals.", vanguards publication of 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2014 reports that "Bed space is our biggest challenge-LASUTH board." And daily trust 6<sup>th</sup> may, 2019: "Patients decry high cost, poor service at teaching hospitals." All these public relations issues are perceived to prevail because of the ineffective of public relations and the ineffectiveness is perceived to be the consequence of the challenges faced by public relations practitioners in Nigeria which will be enumerated below.

### **Challenges of PR in Tertiary health Institutions in Nigeria**

All professions face challenges and problems peculiar to their field of endeavor. Public relations' problems are peculiar to the country or organization where it is operating. Public relations in health institutions have faced considerable challenges which may not differ from public relations challenges in other fields, but certainly have its peculiarities. These challenges include, but not limited to:

Misconception of the Profession: there is a challenge of misconceptions by some organisation, either out of sheer ignorance or the desire to achieve selfish goals by its describers, who associate public relations to propoganda and other negative terms. This is supported by Nwosu (2005), that:

*The nonsensical definition of public relations comes from those who do not what public relations is all about or intentionally want to denigrate it and its practitioners. They will, for example, say that public relations have to do with bribes, doing propoganda, telling lies for your organisation, window dressing, getting prostitutes for board members, organizing parties and such other nonsense that does not portray what public relations is all about (Nwosu 2005, p.10)*

Corroborating the position of Nwosu, Chiakaan and Oliver (2020) stated that those who equate PR to with these negative practices do not hesitate to apply these "nonsensical PR" to achieve their selfish aims to the detriment of their publics and the entire Nigerian society.

The profession is infiltrated by quacks: the profession is swarming with quacks that do not know anything about the public relations but feel it is the simplest profession to practice in the world. According to Chiakaan and Oliver (2020), these are people who are not trained in any field related to PR, are not communicators, do not know anything about crisis management and do not care or simply do not know anything about perception or opinion research and its value and they are not certified members of Nigerian institute of public relations. Unfortunately for the profession, these quacks go in to the practice of PR with the assumption and erroneous mindset that PR is about dressing well, talking and convincing people. Publicity to them is the central thing in PR. Modern public relations according to Keghu (2015), is ninety-five percent action and five percent publicity.

Also, Keghku (2015), posits that, another challenge that appears to be bedeviling PR profession in Nigeria is its status or nomenclature. The management of many organisation in Nigeria do not recognize public relations as a management function. In such organisation, PR is equated with protocol function. This implies that public relations input when policies or programmes are being planned is absent. PR officers are only expected to ensure that policies decided upon by the management are successfully implemented whether they are popular or not. Condemning this development, Chile (2003) observes that:

*There is a misconception particularly in Nigeria's public life that the function of public relations and its personnel in modern organisation, both public and private is to recognize receptions, make the occasions that warrant that occasion public and last, act as pimps. Once the public relations officer fails in any of these, he is regarded as a ne'er-do-well. But if we have to understand what management is in its clear perspective, we will have to recognize that the role of opinion and information is crucial in management decision making. For informed decision to be taken, these two*

*viatal inputs must be made and the function that is best equipped in supplying these two inputs is what we refer to as public relations (Chile 2003, p.67).*

A study conducted by Maina (2020) on assessment of public relations strategies of health institutions: a comparative analysis of Jos University Teaching Hospital (JUTH) and Federal Medical Center (FMC) Keffi, finds out that public relations is not considered a management function. This makes it difficult for public relations to function as it should.

Furthermore, another challenge confronting PR practice in Nigeria is the perceived high cost of its programmes by the management of some organisations. Some organisations tend to consider PR activities as being too expensive according to Okpoko (2014), PR units especially in tertiary institution are inadequately funded. Some organisations even feel reluctant in sponsoring their public relations officers to attend NIPR organized seminars or workshops and other programmes. Precious (2016), posits that funding is a challenge to public relations in Nigeria because any time most organisations want to cut down budget or downsize, public relations department is always the first to be affected. He added that lack of sponsorship for public relations training on emerging trends and modern public relations practice.

The challenges of public relations in Nigeria are numerous and seem inexhaustive we can therefore, conclude by acknowledging the challenges put forth by Utor (2005), thus:

1. There is a lack of clarity in understanding the duties of public relations officers. This problem has brought confusion in the industry with regards to what should constitute the duties of PR officers.
2. There are many quacks or interlopers in the practice of the profession. The activities of these people who are neither trained nor certified to carry out public relations functions constitute a major problem to the effective practice of PR in Nigeria.
3. The non-cooperative attitude of some members of the PR profession is another problem. Some public relations professionals are unethical in their operations even though they are aware of the Nigerian institute of Public Relations code.
4. There is a lack of credibility in the practice of Public Relations. Stories about some organisations from professional PR officers are false and misleading. This has made many people view PR as mere propaganda and/or falsehood
5. Another problem is the uncooperative attitude of some government information officers. These people could hardly implement recommendations or NIPR policies.
6. The advent of new technologies is another problem. Rather than help improve the practice, of PR, the new technologies have left some practitioners behind as they cannot cope. Some practitioners cannot even operate computers. Organisations with people in this group can find themselves lacking information about their activities.
7. The conflict between the code of NIPR professional ethics and interest of individual organisations has been another problem. Where an organisation's business interest runs into conflict with the provisions of the code of professional ethics of NIPR, the PR officer of such organisation is divided. In some situation, he has to abandon the code of ethics and act unethically if he must hold on to his job.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has been able to capture what public relations the profession that establish and maintain mutual relationship between an organisation and its publics using communication as tool. The write up also enumerated some functions of communication to include media relations and crisis management among others. The paper achieved its objective by enumerating some of the challenges faced by public relations in Nigerian tertiary health institutions which include misconceptions, quacks and lack of funding among others. from the above discussion, it is evident that public relations in Nigerian tertiary health institution is limited by plethora of challenges and need urgent attention to salvage it from those limitation to effectively function.

### **Suggestions**

1. To get maximum output from the PR department, the management of health institutions should employ qualified staff who are either PR professionals or are trained in the field of mass communication.
2. To supplement for unqualified staff, the management of tertiary health institution in Nigeria should frequently send their PR staff for training to acquire relevant knowledge and skills in PR practice to make the department effective in the discharge of professional duties.
3. Public relations department in tertiary health institutions should be adequately funded by the management so that they can be effective or more effective as the case may be in the discharge of their duties. Funding will help the department in aspects like research, organizing community outreach and procurement of utility vehicle among other needs without which the departments cannot function well.

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