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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Strengthening Health Systems Toward the Control of Neglected Tropical Diseases and other Health Challenges

It is my pleasure to welcome our readers and all stakeholders to the new year and this issue of the journal. We always appreciate the support and patronage of all our enthusiastic authors, reviewers, editors, and readers for their contributions.

The 30th of January of every year has been designated as World Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) Day. This represents a global effort to raise awareness about the impact of NTDs on vulnerable populations and to advocate for increased support in combating these diseases.¹ The aim is to unite governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), healthcare professionals, and communities towards appreciating the urgency of addressing these often-overlooked diseases.

Neglected tropical diseases include several parasitic, viral, bacterial, and fungal diseases that cause substantial illness for an estimated 1.62 billion people globally.^{1,2} These diseases affect the populations already experiencing health and economic disparities, contribute to mother and child illness and death, make it difficult to farm or earn a living and limit productivity in the workplace. As a result, NTDs trap individuals and communities in a cycle of poverty and disease, especially in tropical and subtropical regions. They include a range of parasitic, bacterial, and viral infections, such as leishmaniasis, lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis (river blindness), schistosomiasis, rabies, and soil-transmitted helminthiasis, among others.^{1,3}

One of the main reasons these diseases persist is their "neglected" status, stemming from a lack of attention and

resources. Often overshadowed by high-profile diseases like malaria, HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis, NTDs struggle to attract funding and research efforts. The populations affected by NTDs are typically those with limited access to healthcare, education, and sanitation, exacerbating the cycle of poverty and disease. Neglected tropical diseases continue to pose a significant threat to the health and well-being of millions of people worldwide particularly in our sub-region.^{2,3}

Addressing these diseases requires a multifaceted approach that includes increased awareness, funding, research, and multisectoral collaboration. By tackling NTDs, we can not only improve the health outcomes of affected communities but also contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty and fostering sustainable development. It is time to bring NTDs out of the shadows and work towards a healthier, more equitable future for all.

Eradicating NTDs requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach involving governments at various levels, healthcare professionals, the private sector, communities, and international partners. Some of the recommended strategies include the following:^{2,5}

Strengthening Healthcare Systems: This requires multifaceted investment towards strengthening the overall healthcare system, ensuring that it is equipped to diagnose, treat, and prevent NTDs and other prevailing health challenges. This includes increased funding, training healthcare workers, improving facilities, and integrating NTD services into existing health structures. Adequate funding is

essential for the procurement of medications, healthcare infrastructure improvement, research, and public awareness campaigns.

Expanding Mass Drug Administration (MDA) Programs: MDA is a cost-effective strategy for treating and preventing several NTDs, such as lymphatic filariasis and onchocerciasis.

Research and Surveillance: There should be robust surveillance systems to foster early detection and timely response are critical for effective control and elimination efforts. There is also a need for investment in research to better understand the epidemiology of NTDs and to promote the development of innovative approaches, diagnostics, and treatments.

Strengthening and integrating NTD programs with other health initiatives: This will maximize resources and provide comprehensive healthcare while addressing multiple health challenges simultaneously.

Other measures include: community engagement and education, improved sanitation and water supply, and expanded vector control programs. Furthermore, our various countries must foster effective collaboration with international partners i.e. international organizations, NGOs, and pharmaceutical companies involved in NTD control efforts. It is acknowledged that there have been a number of these initiatives over the years but their impact needs to be regularly monitored and evaluated. This will help identify areas of improvement, track progress, and make evidence-based decisions for more effective interventions.⁵

One of the diseases that has been designated as a neglected tropical disease is Rabies. Rabies is a vaccine-preventable viral disease most often transmitted through the bite of a rabid animal. The rabies virus infects the central nervous system of mammals, ultimately causing disease in the brain and death. The vast majority of rabies cases in sub-Saharan Africa are transmitted through the bites of a rabid dog. Preventive interventions (such as pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis) constitute the mainstay of rabies control, and they are very successful when implemented correctly.⁶

This was the focus of the work by Puplampu et al who undertook a retrospective review of the epidemiological and clinical characteristics of human rabies that presented to a tertiary referral health facility in Accra, Ghana. The study also reviewed the practice of rabies post-exposure prophylaxis over the period under review. The majority of the 28 cases reviewed were males and mostly adolescents and young adults with 100% mortality recorded. It was also reported that majority (80%) of patients took neither anti-rabies vaccine nor immunoglobulin as post-exposure prophylaxis. The level of mortality recorded was apparently because the review focused on patients who already had symptoms at presentation. This underscores the high case fatality associated with symptomatic rabies and that prevention and prophylaxis remain the ultimate goal.

The findings from the study underscore the need for stakeholders to intensify efforts at mitigating this and other neglected public health problems. Towards this, widespread dog vaccination efforts must be combined

with efficient and successful health promotion and education programs. It is also imperative to guarantee the accessibility and availability of affordable post-exposure prophylaxis.

The several other articles presented in this issue also explored relevant and interesting topics from the diverse fields of medicine and surgery. Adejumo et al conducted a comparative study of the clinical presentation and outcomes of patients admitted and managed for COVID-19 during the first and second waves of the pandemic in Nigeria and found that despite fewer hospitalised patients, there were more deaths during the second wave.

In another review, Tobin and colleagues underscored the need to strengthen public health response systems toward an effective response to the Lassa fever epidemic and other infectious diseases. I also welcome the editorial article on the unmet need for geriatric care which further highlights another aspect of healthcare delivery in our subregion that needs prompt and adequate attention. I am convinced that readers will find the articles in this issue interesting and insightful.

The WAJM continues to serve as a veritable platform for our hardworking researchers to communicate their contributions to the body of knowledge, hence we again invite the submission of original research articles, case reports, review articles, and brief communications. We are committed to continuously enhancing the quality and responsiveness of our services, as well as the contentment of our valued contributors.

Prof G. E. Erhabor

*Editor-in-chief, West African Journal of
Medicine, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria.*

Department of Medicine, Obafemi Awolowo

*University/Obafemi Awolowo University
Teaching Hospital, Ile-Ife, Nigeria*

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