

# Health Public Relations in Emergency Situations: Evaluating Pregnant Women-Doctors Relationship during Covid-19 Pandemic in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo, Lagos State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

This research work examines the effectiveness of adopting Health Public Relations Practices to facilitate pregnant women-doctors relationship during Covid-19 Pandemic in Ibeju-Lekki General hospital, Akodo, Lagos State. Health public relations is the strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation of communication tactics for the purposes of influencing health attitudes, knowledge, behaviors, and decision making. The major objective of this study is to examine the impact of health public relations practices in promoting Pregnant Women-Doctors Relationship. Survey was adopted as a method, while questionnaire served as an instrument for data collection. The population of the study was four hundred and thirty-two, (432) registered pregnant women in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo, Lagos State. A sample size of approximately two hundred (200) respondents was determined using Taro Yamane formula. The simple random sampling technique with fish bowl method was adopted while the data obtained was tested for validity and reliability. Data collection was through interpersonal channels and proxy. The Statistical Package for Social science (SPSS) Version 28 was employed in the analysis of data. The study found out that only the effect of the demographic factors such as age has significant effect on the respondents. The study concluded that health public relations practices contribute immensely to the relationship between doctors and pregnant women at large.

**Keywords: Communication, COVID-19, Doctor-patient Relationship, Healthcare, Health, Health Public Relations, Public Relations**

## Introduction

Most pregnant women naturally face psychological, physical and health challenges during pregnancy. With the current pneumonia outbreak of corona/virus disease (COVID-19), pregnant women are at a more higher risk of neonatal and /or maternal mortality. Coronavirus is caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. The spread of the virus is predicted to climax around April 2020, without any significant reduction in transmissibility. Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a global public health burden that began in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019. It is an international public health emergency (Wilder-Smith, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020) that has crippled the economy of many nations. Countries such as Nigeria have adopted several public health measures, based on World Health Organization recommendation, to contain the pandemic, COVID-19. The measures include personal hygiene practices such as regular hand washing, wearing of face masks in public places, and physical/social distancing. Countries have also instituted public health measures, such as widespread testing, isolation of patients, contact tracing, and quarantine measures. Community-wide containment includes partial or complete lockdowns of the economy, restrictions on travel and movement, and banning or limiting public gatherings (Dashraath, 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the healthcare landscape, placing a huge strain on healthcare providers, including those who provide essential health services for pregnant women. Globally, healthcare workers are

currently facing increased workloads, shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), harassment and evolving clinical guidance on proven ways to care for their patients. A critical component in the management of any communicable disease's threat is the care of vulnerable populations. Pregnant women are known to be disproportionately affected by respiratory illnesses, which are associated with increased infectious morbidity and high maternal mortality rates. Although most human corona virus infections are mild, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) and Middle East respiratory syndrome corona virus (MERS-CoV) epidemics of the past two decades have been especially grave, with approximately one third of infected pregnant women dying from the illness (Dashraath,Wong, Lim, Lim, Biswas, Choolani, Mattar, and Su 2019:1).

Maintaining a good Health is very crucial to living, hence, there is a need for the populace to be armed with pertinent health information that can promote good health. Health literacy therefore refers to one's ability to obtain, process and understand health information and/or services to enable sound health decision-making (Jefford, Fahy and Sundin, 2012). There have been significant changes in the delivery of health care over the last few decades. Among these has been a shift to a more patient-centered approach to health care delivery which requires effective partnerships between health-care workers and patients. Patient-centered care implies that information and resources are tailored to individual patients' understanding of health information and their ability to navigate the health system, also known as "health literacy". Patients are often required to make important decisions about disease prevention, screening and treatment based on information provided by health professionals (Benjamin, 2016).

WHO (1948) defined health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health literacy is not a new concept in clinical practice. The term was originally coined in 1974, though it has received significant attention only in the last decade. One of the more widely used definitions of health literacy is "the degree to which individuals can obtain, process, understand and communicate about health-related information needed to make informed health decisions" (Berkman, Davis and McCormack 2010). Health literacy and collaboration between patients and care givers are the hallmark of patient- care. Health literacy is more than just literacy and numeracy skills in the health context. "Health literacy" is an umbrella term encompassing different aspects of patients' interaction with the health system from the patient's perspective. This include the ability to communicate, to be involved in clinical care and to access health care (Benjamin, 2016).

Health Public relations practices are one of the information dissemination platforms for the purpose of placating or persuading stakeholders, promoting organizational positions, and managing the organizational image. However, alternate conceptualizations define the function of public relations as interacting with and soliciting input from publics for the purpose of shaping the organizational decisions that affect them (Grunig, 2002). Adopting a generally acceptable definition for public relations has been an herculean task for decades. This is mainly due to the wide range of implemented activities within the framework of PR and the wealth of available communication tools. The main area of transformation concentrates around the sphere of tools used in public relations and changes in managers' awareness. They are the ones who are increasingly interested in adopting advisory support systems (Bonnie, 2007).

The COVID-19 pandemic challenges public relations practitioners' ability to develop effective communication plans that will replace previously planned strategies that became frozen. The role of public relations practitioners in tackling this pandemic situation is crucial, since they are communication specialists that craft messages by using various platforms, methods, and channels. Health public relations practice is the strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation of communication tactics for purposes of influencing health attitudes, knowledge, behaviours and decision making.

This study is targeted at determining the effectiveness of health public relations in promoting pregnant women-doctor relationship in health organizations during COVID-19 through effective interpersonal communication and

also public relations effort to frame health issues. The study discusses the role of public relations for image creation in health services. Hospitals require public relations activities to distinguish them from competitors, provide bidirectional communication between the society and the hospital and assist to create a strong hospital image and culture. Therefore, it is pertinent to understand the influence of health public relations practices on doctor-patient relationship. The study will also determine the health public relations tools and needs of pregnant women in the health sector.

### **Statements of the Problem**

The Nigerian Federal government improved her health care facilities through the establishment of emergency operation centers (EOC) responsible for screening of travelers, disease surveillance, case management, contact tracing and offering of various laboratory services such as early diagnosis, immediate quarantine and isolation of suspected cases in the different states of the federation. As of May 11, 2021, samples of one million nine hundred and seventy-seven thousand four hundred and ninety-seven (1,977,497) out of a population of over 205 million was tested. Nonetheless, several more cases across the states with no travel history out of Nigeria nor related to the contact index have also been reported. Lagos has however remained the epicentre of the pandemic in Nigeria accounting for over one third (35.5%) of the confirmed cases and 16.5% of deaths as of May 11, 2021.

From the 9th to 11th of July 2022, 357 new confirmed cases were recorded, 258874 cases have been confirmed, 250456 cases have been discharged and 3,144 deaths have been recorded in 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. The 357 new cases were reported from 6 States- Lagos (292), Yobe (25), Rivers (20), FCT (11), Kano (7), and Delta (2).

Going by the increasing spate of the pandemic in Lagos state and the vulnerability of pregnant women to the scourge, there is a need to investigate the extent to which effective interpersonal communication skills were deployed by physicians in such emergencies. There are many barriers to good communication in the doctor-patient relationship, including patients' anxiety, doctors' burden of work, fear of litigation, physicians' fear of physical or verbal abuse, and unrealistic patient expectations. The doctor-patient interaction is a complex process, and serious miscommunication is a potential pitfall, especially in respect of patients' understanding of their prognosis, purpose of care, expectations, and involvement in treatment. These important factors may affect the choices patients make regarding their treatment options which can significantly influence disease management. Good communication skills practiced by doctors allowed patients to perceive themselves as full participants during discussions relating to their health, most especially, during the critical period of COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the challenges that pregnant women face during emergencies is the perennial problem of timeliness in health care delivery. While other patients may be accustomed to waiting for long hours in a health facility, it is however not a welcome development for pregnant women. Previous studies such as that of (Iyaniwura and Yussuf 2009) report pregnant women lack of satisfaction with the time allotted to clinical consultation. Other problems are relating to the brusque manner with which health care providers relate with pregnant women which makes it difficult for the providers to establish rapport and gain the trust of the women. The World Health Organisation recommends that antenatal care delivery should provide both informational and emotional support to pregnant women. This is particularly important for women who are victims of domestic violence. In contrast, physicians' training allows for a professional and detached approach to prognosis and care delivery. In many developed nations, however, health care providers particularly physicians are adopting the psychosocial approach to medical care which is a more holistic approach to care. The crux of this paper is to investigate to what extent public health relations tools are being deployed by physicians in facilitating an effective relationship between them (physicians) and pregnant women.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of health public relations in pregnant women-doctors relationship during Covid-19 Pandemic in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo, Lagos State. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the impact of health public relations tools on the attitude of medical doctors towards pregnant women during COVID-19 pandemic in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo.
2. Investigate the mediating factors that affect health public relations practices between medical doctors and pregnant women during COVID-19 pandemic in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the impact of health public relation practice on the attitude of medical doctors towards pregnant women during COVID-19 pandemic in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo?
2. What are the mediating factors affecting health public relations practices between medical doctors and pregnant women during COVID-19 pandemic in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo?

### **Literature Review**

There are studies on health public relations practices and doctors-pregnant women relationship in the health sector. It is important to ascertain the effectiveness of health public relations practices on health personnel in general. Therefore, the impact of health public relation practices on the attitude of medical doctors towards pregnant women will be examined here, Alkureishi, Lee, and Arora (2016) in a systematic review of literature sought to understand the impact of EMR (electronic medical record) use on patient-doctor relationships and communication. Methodologically, parallel searches were conducted in Ovid, MEDLINE, PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, Cochrane Library and reference reviews of prior systematic reviews. Similarly, abstract, and expert reviews were also conducted from August 2013 to March 2015. Medical subject heading terms connected to EMR use were employed in conjunction with keyword terms on face-to-face patient-doctor communication. English language observational or interventional studies formed part of the inclusion criteria while. Studies examining physician attitudes were excluded. The results indicate that physicians displayed possibly negative communication behaviors with EMR use. This in other words implies that the physicians dominated patients during conversations and there were very limited eye contact between the two. Additionally, there were episodes of multitasking on the part of physicians which affected their attention to the conversation and patients. Consequently there were low rates of sharing the computer screen with the patients.

Andrissi, Petraglia, Giuliani, Severi, Angioni, Valensise, Vannuccini, Comoretto, Tambone (2015) investigate the influence of doctor-patient and midwife-patient relationship in quality care perception of Italian pregnant women. The study examined pregnant women's perception of gynecologist technical expertise. Pregnant women within 24-48 hours after natural or operative birth, were sampled from three maternity units in Italy. The women filled in a questionnaire about their relationship with a gynecologist and midwife during pregnancy and lived experience during hospital stay for delivery. The results set the basis to improve patient satisfaction while decreasing healthcare costs. The results portrayed the role of midwife as the 'link' between the natural and technical dimension of birth. The quality of welcome and the establishment of an empathic relationship between the women and their healthcare professionals shows a decrease in health care cost which could have arisen if there were further request for care in the post-partum period. The study concluded that there is a fault plane between nature and technique of delivery which is a very critical zone for litigation. Women are quick to respond to the warmth and attention they receive during their admission in the hospital, as well as to the quality of interpersonal relationship with midwife.

Importantly, there are some mediating factors that affect health public relations practices between medical doctors and pregnant women during Covid-19. Therefore, Chandra, Mohammadnezhad and Ward (2018) examine the

changing pattern in the doctor-patient relationship as it is becoming more of a challenge for health care providers. For a healthy and effective doctor-patient relation, trust and communication is considered to play a vital role. The review was conducted with the aim to gather the knowledge and concepts pertaining to communication and trust in a doctor-patient relationship and how they influence patient satisfaction and perceived quality of health care services. Electronic databases such as PubMed, Hinari, Cochrane, Scopus and Google Scholar were employed to search for the articles. Related article titles were selected and narrowed down to relevant abstracts. Seventeen articles were eventually selected and reviewed. All the reviewed articles emphasized that both trust and communication were positively related to patient satisfaction and perceived quality of health care services in terms of improved compliance with medical counsel and treatment regimen. This is said to be the case in both developed and developing countries of the world. Though, the determinants of trust differed slightly between rural and urban setting. It was observed that in the rural setting, apart from the doctor's communication skills, the level of interpersonal treatment and knowledge about the patient, respect for the doctors and treatment assurance facilitate patients' trust. Consequently, a patient-centered communication that allows for bi-directional conversation using open-ended questions leads to better communication. Collaborative decision-making facilitates better management and improved chances of patient compliance with treatment. The current evidence suggests that when clinicians adopt a patient-centered approach with effective communications skills there is improved care management and patient satisfaction. This is also associated with increased adherence to the treatment, improved health outcomes and better perceived quality of healthcare services.

In summary, the articles and journals included in this review were all published between 2010 and 2021, covering roughly 12 years of research on health, public relations, and doctor-patient relationship. The reviewed works focused on health public relations practices and doctor-patient relationship. Most of the sampled journals had foreign related content. Therefore, there is a need to domesticate the practice of health public relations as regard to doctor-patient relationship in Lagos State.

### **Theoretical framework**

The appropriate theory underpinning this research work is Two Way Symmetrical Model of public relations. Two way symmetrical model is one of Grunig and Hunt's four Models of Public Relations (1984). In his first study of public relations behaviour, Professor James Grunig (1976) took the idea of one-way and two-way models of communications, but elaborated on the idea by including the purpose and direction of communication. He used Thayer's (1968) concept of synchrony to synchronize the behaviour of a public with that of the organization; so that the organisation can continue to behave in the way it wants without interference; (Grunig 1992; 287) and diachronic to negotiate a state of affairs that benefits both the organisation and the public (Grunig 1992; 287).

Closer investigation proves that the two-way symmetric model relies on honest and open two-way communication and mutual give-and-take rather than a one-way persuasion. It focuses on mutual respect and efforts to achieve mutual understanding; emphasizes negotiation and willingness to adapt and make compromises. It also requires organizations engaging in public relations to be willing to make significant adjustments in their operation in order to accommodate their publics. This model seems more popular among non-profit organizations, government agencies, and heavily regulated businesses such as public utilities companies than by competitive, profit-driven companies. Today the two-way symmetrical model enables two groups of people to share ideas and gain something from the experience. This is an ideal way to communicate and technology has facilitated that process of communication more than ever before. No wonder, many companies are now taking advantage of new web technologies to encourage a two-way communication (Grunig& Kim, 2021). In essence, the relevance of two way symmetrical models to this study is that, it emphasizes the use of public relations tools in developing mutual respect and efforts to achieve mutual understanding. It also stresses that organizations should be willing to make significant adjustments in their operation in order to accommodate their publics. This theory serves as a guide to both doctors and pregnant women.

**Methodology**

This is a cross sectional study where data was conducted through survey method. The study was conducted in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo, Lagos State. There were Four hundred and thirty two registered pregnant women in the Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo, Lagos State. The study employed purposive sampling techniques and adopted questionnaire as an instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was designed and administered directly to the respondents, who were pregnant women in the Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo, Lagos State. The data was collected using face-to face method in order to guarantee a high return rate of filled copies of the questionnaire. Data was analyzed through frequency counts and tables’ distribution using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28

**Data Analysis and Presentation**

The impact of health public relations tools on the attitude of medical doctors towards pregnant women during covid-19

**TABLE 1: COGNITIVE, AFFECTIVE AND CONATIVE DIMENSIONS TO PATIENTS’ PERCEPTION**

Variables	SA	A	UN	D	SD	Total
<b>COGNITION</b>						
I feel my problems are treated with professional dispatch	91 (52.9%)	63 (36.6%)	9 (5.2%)	1 (0.6%)	8 (4.7%)	172 (100.0%)
I think my health concerns are thoroughly attended to by the doctor	88 (51.2%)	67 (39.0%)	11 (6.4%)	4 (2.3%)	2 (1.2%)	172 (100.0%)
<b>AFFECTIVE</b>						
I feel that the doctors’ competency and qualities will enhance my health conditions	112 (65.1%)	47 (27.3%)	5 (2.9%)	7 (4.1%)	1 (0.6%)	172 (100.0%)
I feel the doctors information source or advice is not clear or contradictory	30 (17.4%)	35 (20.3%)	22 (12.8%)	61 (35.5%)	24 (14.0%)	172 (100.0%)
<b>CONATIVE</b>						
I make sure I am available whenever the doctor is ready to accommodate me.	91 (52.9%)	59 (34.3%)	18 (10.5%)	4 (2.3%)	-	172 (100.0%)
I rely on the pregnancy-related information given to me by the doctor.	116 (67.4%)	35 (20.3%)	15 (8.7%)	6 (3.5%)	-	172 (100.0%)

*Source: Researchers 2022*

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the attitude of medical doctors towards pregnant women. Based on the responses, almost all the respondents agreed that their problems were treated with professional dispatch (89.5%). Majority of the respondents (90.2%) agreed that their health concerns were thoroughly attended to by the doctor. Most of the respondents (92.4%) agreed that the doctor’s competency and qualities will enhance their health conditions. Similarly, a good number of the respondents (37.7%) argued that the doctors’ information source or advice were clear and not contradictory. Majority of the respondents affirmed that they were always available whenever the doctor was ready to accommodate them (87.2%). Majority of them (87.7%) also hinted that they relied on the pregnancy related information given by their doctors. The mediating factors affecting health public relations practice between medical doctors and pregnant women during COVID-19 pandemic in Ibeju-Lekki General Hospital, Akodo were also investigated within the context of the study. The results to this question are presented shortly.

**The mediating factors affecting health public relations practices between medical doctors and pregnant women during COVID-19**

**Table 2: PERCEPTION OF PHYSICIAN’S TECHNICAL EXPERTISE**

Variables	SA	A	UN	D	SD	Total
<b>SAFETY ISSUES IN DELIVERY</b>						
The doctors are committed to identifying and addressing my safety problem	120 (69.8%)	46 (26.7%)	4 (2.3%)	1 (0.6%)	1 (0.6%)	172 (100.0%)
Doctors are more interested in my safety than their own safety	61 (35.5%)	64 (37.2%)	29 (16.9%)	15 (8.7%)	3 (1.7%)	172 (100.0%)
<b>MANAGEMENT OF COMPLICATION.</b>						172 (100.0%)
The doctors make sure I am aware of my medical problem	99 (57.6%)	64 (37.2%)	5 (2.9%)	4 (2.3%)	-	172 (100.0%)
The doctor maintains communication with me throughout my recovery process.	83 (48.3%)	53 (30.8%)	22 (12.8%)	11 (6.4%)	3 (1.7%)	172 (100.0%)
<b>FINANCE</b>						
I cancel my appointment with the doctor due to lack of funds	23 (13.4%)	37 (21.5%)	18 (10.5%)	50 (29.1%)	44 (25.6%)	172 (100.0%)

**Source: Researchers 2022**

To measure the moderating factors affecting health public relations practices between medical doctors and pregnant women the respondents were asked to respond to series of statements. As stated in table 4.2.7 majority of the respondents (96.5%) agreed that the doctors were committed to identifying and addressing their safety issues Most of them (72.7%) believed that doctors were more interested in the pregnant women’s safety than their(doctor’s) own safety. Majority of the respondents, (94.8%) agreed that the doctors made sure they (patients) were aware of their medical problem Most of the respondents, (79.1%) agreed that the doctor maintained communication with them throughout their recovery process. More than half of the respondents did not however cancel their appointment with the doctor due to lack of funds (54.7%).

**Discussion of Findings**

From the data obtained in this study, it is apparent that only management of complication (MC1) and Affective (A1) significantly impact health public relation tools with respect to the attitude of medical doctors towards pregnant women. The finding of this study is in consonance with the findings of Andrissi, Petraglia, Giuliani, Severi, Angioni, Valensise, Vannuccini, Comoretto, Tambone (2015) which state that pregnant women tend to report satisfaction with care, if they perceive their caregivers as having displayed better interpersonal communication skills. In contrast, Skountridaki (2019), argues that there are power differentials in patient-doctor interactions. In other words, the call for a balance in patient-provider communication may be a mirage, since the patients are actually at the mercy of their physicians. The physicians, on their part, may find it difficult relating with patients as equals, because of their professional training, knowledge of disease prognosis and remediation therapy. With particular respect to this current study, the factors affecting health public relations practices between medical doctors and pregnant women such as safety in delivery, management of complications and finance really did not have an effect on the relationship between medical doctors and pregnant women in this study. This finding is in tandem with earlier works such as those of Chandra, Mohammadnezhad and Ward (2018) which state that patients’ satisfaction of health care quality is directly related to their perception of providers’ interpersonal communication skills and trust. Thus, patients tend to have a favourable perception of physicians’ technical

expertise, if they trust such physicians. Meanwhile, physicians gain patient's trust overtime through consistent and effective interpersonal communication which would ultimately inform patients' perception of trust. Finally, Adeolan (2020) argues that internal communication crisis within an organization can be forestalled, if there are open communication lines between the organization and her publics. Public relations strategies can also be harnessed in such a way that employees are motivated for optimum productivity.

### Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the importance of health public relations practices, in fostering healthy relationship between doctors and pregnant women has been brought to the fore. Physicians, particularly gynecologists play crucial roles in ensuring a healthy pregnancy and a safe delivery. Incidentally, communication skills are peripheral to the medical profession which explains why there are a whole lot of incidences of medical malpractice suits in the developed nations of the world where patients have learnt the importance of demanding patient-centered care. Be that as it may, public relations is all about promoting a good self image/goodwill not only on the part of the organization but also on the part of clinicians. If good public health relations practices are imbibed by health care workers, it will improve overall maternal health care in the country and reduce incidences of women's patronage of ill equipped hospitals for antenatal or postnatal care for the pregnant women.

### Recommendations

- It is therefore recommended that more time should be allotted for physician-pregnant women consultation to foster an effective two-way communication.
- It is also imperative for government to increase the doctor- patient ratio in the public hospitals, hence, the current massive migration of health care workers should be discouraged.
- Physicians should be adequately compensated in terms of increased financial emoluments, this is to motivate them to deliver patient-centred care.
- Periodic training workshops on communication skills should form part of the required professional development for medical doctors

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