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Using Medical Outreach Strategy to Boost COVID-19 Vaccination in Bayelsa State, Nigeria (June-August 2022)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It was first discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and has since then spread round the globe and became a pandemic. Most people infected with the virus experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. However, some become seriously ill and require medical attention. Anyone can get sick with COVID-19 and become seriously ill or die at any age. It is recommended to maintain a physical distance of at least one meter, wear face masks and observe other respiratory etiquettes, maintain hand hygiene, avoid poorly ventilated or crowded spaces, and above all to get vaccinated. However, COVID-19 vaccine uptake has been challenging due to vaccine hesitancy, misinformation on the safety of the vaccine, and perceived adverse events following immunization. Bayelsa state ranked lowest in terms of vaccination coverage in the federation having 4% of the eligible population partially vaccinated and 2% fully vaccinated. We explored the use of an integrated medical outreach approach to scale up COVID-19 vaccination coverage.

Methods: Using an integrated approach, the medical outreaches that were implemented offered various services to the population including COVID-19 screening, COVID-19 vaccination, tuberculosis screening, free medical screening (blood pressure measurement, blood glucose testing), free medical care and free drug dispensing, health education on COVID-19 and the need for routine immunization. Incentives were given to all those who received the vaccine. Community engagement was done before conducting the outreaches in selected communities.

Results: Sixteen medical outreaches were conducted which spread across all 8 Local Government Areas in the state. A total of 6,856 clients were vaccinated: Johnson & Johnson: 5,998, Pfizer: 848, and AstraZeneca: 10. COVID-19 vaccine coverage improved to 5.4% for partially vaccinated and 2.8% for fully vaccinated persons.

Conclusions: Our integrated medical outreach strategy led to a gradual but significant improvement in COVID-19 vaccination coverage. We recommend this strategy as a potential mitigation measure for vaccine hesitancy and low vaccine uptake in low and middle-income communities.

Keywords: Integration, Medical outreaches, Vaccination, COVID-19, Bayelsa State