

Imperatives of Health Psychologist in the Control and Management of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The paper studied the imperatives of health psychologists in the control and management of HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS is a relatively new disease, but has caused more deaths than any other disease in human history, and there is no known cure yet. Even though, HIV/AIDS is a death sentence, experts agreed that early detection, and early commencement of treatment may prolong the life of the patients, and that early detection may prevent or reduce the transmission of the virus. Early detection, commencement of treatment, and compliance with medical advice are the responsibilities of the health psychologist. This paper therefore, concludes that health psychologist is indispensable in effective control, and management of HIV/AIDS, and so recommends that awareness be created on the roles of health psychologists in this regard, through health education.

Keywords

HIV/AIDS, Health Psychologist, Chimpanzees, Monkeys, Management, Control, Antiretroviral, Bubonic Plague

1. Introduction

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection is one of the most serious and challenging health problems facing the world today, particularly, the developing nations. Worldwide, it is estimated that more than 60 million people, perhaps more, have been infected since the epidemic began—nearly 1% of the world's population, and that more than 20 million have died, with majority of them in Sub-Saharan Africa [1]. According to Insel and

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Roth [1], about 10 people are infected every minute—5 million per year, and half of these new infections are in people aged 15 - 24, and the primary mode of infection is through heterosexual intercourse.

Though, HIV/AIDS is a relatively new disease in humans, experts [1]-[3] believed that the virus initially spread from Chimpanzees and Monkeys to people during the middle of the twentieth century as a result of the trapping, butchering or eating of infected Chimpanzees and Monkeys. Initially, HIV infection was relatively rare, but the disease began to spread rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s, and the mode of spread is mainly through heterosexual intercourse, among others, in the Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the best efforts of health professionals around the world, HIV infection continues to spread, and the cure is yet to be found.

In the mid 1990s, death rates from HIV/AIDS declined sharply in the United States, but some other countries, including the Sub-Saharan Africa, continued to experience increasing rates of HIV infections and AIDS deaths [4]. According to one estimate [5], AIDS is the deadliest plague in history. About 40 million people were infected by 2001, and when those people died, HIV will surpass the number of people killed by the bubonic plague in the 14th century. About 5 million people have acquired HIV infection each year since 2001, extending this plague [6].

Incidence has declined, but mortality, from this disease has dropped even more. In United States, for example, deaths in 2002 were 30% of what they had been in 1995; a decrease was far greater than any other leading cause of death [7]. One reason why the number of deaths from AIDS has declined is that HIV-infected individuals are living longer. People diagnosed with AIDS in 1984 had an average survival time of 11 months [8], whereas 83% of people diagnosed in 1999 were alive more than three years later [9].

This increased survival time is a result of more effective drug therapies, early detection, early commencement of treatment, and lifestyle changes. Combinations of antiretroviral drugs have changed the course of HIV infection, drastically slowing the progression of infection and prolonging lives [10]. In addition, giving up unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking alcohol, taking illicit drugs; becoming more vigilant about their health; and exercising more control over their treatments can help infected persons live longer and healthier lives [11]. Good nutrition and an optimistic attitude also contribute to longevity [12] [13]. This progress could be sustained in the control and management of HIV/AIDS, particularly, in the Sub-Saharan Africa through health psychology.

Health psychology is the branch of psychology that concerns individual behaviors and lifestyles, affecting a person's physical health, with a view to improving prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation. Health psychology includes psychology's contributions to the enhancement of health, the prevention and treatment of diseases, the identification of health risk factors, the improvement of the health care system, and the shaping of public opinion with regard to health [1] [3].

Consequent upon the afore-stated values of healthy psychology, it becomes imperative to apply it in the control and management of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly, in the areas of disease prevention, early diagnosis, commencement of early treatment, adherence to drugs regimen, and lifestyle modification. Unlike in the developed nations, Sub-Saharan Africa is plagued with poverty, illiteracy, superstition, dearth of qualified medical personnel and effective drugs, so prevention is very pertinent to avoiding infection, and the onset of the disease in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, when infection occurs, victims needed to be assisted in managing the burden of the disease. Therefore, the roles of health psychology become imperative in the prevention and management of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Health Psychology

Health psychology is the branch of psychology that concerns individual behaviors, and lifestyles affecting a person's physical health, with a view to improving prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation. Health psychology includes psychology's contributions to the enhancement of health, the prevention and treatment of disease, the identification of health risk factors, the improvement of the health care system, and the shaping of the public opinion with regards to health. More specifically, it involves the application of psychological principles to physical health areas, such as lowering high blood pressure, controlling cholesterol, managing stress, alleviating pain, stopping smoking, managing HIV/AIDS, and moderating other risky behaviors, as well as encouraging regular exercises, medical and dental check-ups, adherence to medical instructions—vis-à-vis drugs taking, and safer behaviors.

In addition, health psychology helps identify conditions that affect health, diagnose and treat certain chronic diseases, and modify the behavioral factors involved in physiological and psychological rehabilitation. As such, health psychology interacts with both biology, sociology and other related subjects to produce health and dis-

ease-related outcomes.

Although chronic diseases have many causes, individual behavior and lifestyle are strongly implicated in their development [3]. Because behavior is so important for chronic disease, such as HIV/AIDS, psychology—the science of behavior, has become involved in health care.

A large part of psychology's involvement in health care is a commitment to keeping people healthy rather than waiting to treat them after they become ill [14]. Psychology shares this role with medicine and other health care disciplines, but unlike medicine which tends to study specific diseases, psychology contributes to certain broad principles of behavior that cut across specific diseases and specific health issues. Among psychology's contributions to health care are techniques for changing behaviors that have been implicated in chronic diseases such as for example, risky sexual behaviors, failure to go for HIV test, and non-adherence to medical instructions factors that complicates HIV/AIDS control and management.

In addition to changing unhealthy behaviors, psychologists have also used their skills to relieve pain and reduce stress, improve compliance with medical advice, and help patients and family members live with chronic diseases [3].

3. Health Psychology and HIV/AIDS Pre-Test

From the beginning of the AIDS epidemics, psychologist, through counseling, has had an important role in combating the spread of the infection [15]. During the early years of the epidemic, psychologists were involved in both primary and secondary prevention efforts. Primary prevention includes changing behavior to decrease HIV transmission. Secondary prevention includes helping people who are HIV positive to live with the infection, counseling people about being tested for HIV, helping patients deal with social and interpersonal aspects of the disease, and helping patients adhere to their complex treatment programmes.

Besides, HIV infected individuals undergo a series of emotional crises through which they must be assisted. Counseling therefore, prepares the individual for the implication and consequences of either a positive or negative test. The aims of Pretest counseling, according to Nordberg [16] include:

- 1) Assessment of the person's risk as to potential infection;
- 2) Provide risk reduction information by discussing the facts about HIV transmission and how risk of acquiring or transmitting the infection can be prevented or minimized;
- 3) Prepare the individual for a possible positive test;
- 4) Gain the trust of the individual that the test result will be kept confidential by the counselor;
- 5) Assist the individual to prepare for lifestyle modifications after HIV/AIDS test.

The need of the person being counseled becomes more evident during the counseling process, fears are allayed, and trust is built for post-test relationship. Furthermore, pretest counseling focuses on the advantages of being tested, which according to [16] include:

- 1) Reduction of uncertainty in people who may have previously been involved in risky behaviors, and wish to change but are unsure of their status;
- 2) Provides motivation for behavior change for both the infected and uninfected;
- 3) Allows one better plan relationships to protect self and others;
- 4) Assist women who may have been involved in risky behavior to make decisions about any possible pregnancy;
- 5) Screen those wishing to marry or enter into new relationships.

People who believe they may be infected with HIV, as well as those who know that they are, can benefit from various psychological interventions. People with high-risk behaviors may have difficulty in deciding whether to be tested for HIV, and psychologists can provide both information and support for those people. The decision to be tested for HIV has both benefits and costs to the individual, but testing is considered essential to the control of HIV infection [17]. Far too many people undergo testing after their disease has progressed, and treatment options are less effective [3]. Early testing for those who are HIV positive allows early treatment, which will prolong the lives of these individuals and will permit them to find ways to reduce or eliminate behaviors that will place others at risk.

4. Health Psychologist and HIV/AIDS Post-Test

The roles of health psychologist are pertinent in HIV/AIDS control and management [16] affirmed that post-test

counseling for HIV/AIDS individual revolves around the communication of test results. According to him, this may be a matter of life and death for the individual if done incorrectly. The health psychologist is better placed, by virtue of their training and skills, to appropriately break the news to minimize the effects. People who are informed that they are HIV infected go through a series of recognizable emotional reactions. These include shock, anger, guilt, loss of identity, feelings of insecurity, fear, sadness, depression, and even relief [16], all of which are the responsibilities of the psychologist to deal with.

In addition, with support, particularly of family members, friends, care givers and counselors, individuals come to terms with their infection status and move on to focus on living rather than dying. The encouragement to keep on going on in life is the ultimate of post test counseling. Thus, [16] affirmed that an individual who has reached the stage of accepting life with HIV/AIDS can help others who are similarly affected by assisting with information, education, and communication (IEC) control activities.

Health psychologists can also help HIV/AIDS patients adhere to the complex medical regimens designed to control HIV infections [15]. Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART) consists of a combination of anti-retroviral medications. Patients often take other drugs to combat side effects of the antiretroviral drugs as well as drugs to fight opportunistic infections. These regimens may include as many as a dozen drugs, all of which must be timed precisely. When patients do not follow the schedule, the effectiveness diminishes. Health psychologists can help patients adhere to this schedule, as well as facilitate their self-management skills.

Further to the relevance of Health psychologists, Brannon and Feist [3] observed that chronic diseases bring changes that require adaptation for both the person with the disease, and family members. Chronically ill patients must manage their symptoms, seek appropriate health care, and adapt to the psychological changes that occur in this situation. Their social and emotional needs may be neglected by health care professionals who attend to the patients' physical needs.

Health psychologists and support groups help provide for the emotional needs associated with chronic illness. A major impact of chronic illness, according to Brannon and Feist [3] involves the changes that occur in how people think of themselves, that is, the diagnosis of a chronic disease changes self-perception. Chronic illness, such as AIDS, and treatment force many patients to re-evaluate their lives, relationships, and body image [18]. Being diagnosed with a chronic illness represents a loss [19], and people adapt to such loss through a process of grieving [20]. Finding meaning in the experience of loss is more extensive than grieving, but developing an understanding of the meaning of the loss is an important part of coping with the chronic illness, which is better facilitated by a health psychologist through counseling.

Also, health psychologist persuades HIV/AIDS patients to commence early treatment. Early commencement of treatment by HIV/AIDS patients is imperative in delaying mortality. Early treatment with adequate nutrition is essential in HIV/AIDS because, at that time, the immune system of the body is still high. And also, at the early treatment, adequate nutrition with appropriate lifestyle modification, aimed at reducing stress, fatigue, and prevention of any infection, is essential for HIV/AIDS management. With appropriate drugs, adherence to drugs regimen, good nutrition, and lifestyle modification, the life of HIV/AIDS patients may be prolonged, morbidity reduced, and the patient may be able to keep his job longer to get money to fund the cost of treatment. It therefore behoves on the health psychologist to use his knowledge; skills and techniques to ensure early testing, early treatment, and lifestyle modification.

Furthermore, counseling HIV/AIDS patients should include various health education and information as well as fact-finding. The counselor may start with the natural history of the disease and what the patient might expect in future. This is vital to establish clear facts and remove doubts and misconceptions. Clear understanding helps people look after themselves better, take appropriate action, and avoid wasting meager resources, time, and hope and useless alleged cures and traditional medicine which is common in developing nations.

Moreover, there are other pertinent issues which may require the services of a psychologist. The patient needs to be taught how to communicate the news to loved ones, family members, and friends who will be a central pillar of future support care. Determine the available personal resources of the patient such as family, friends, employers, fiancée etc. that may be used for treatment. This according to Nordberg [16], prevents distress and helps the patient plan a future within practical limits.

Since HIV/AIDS has no cure for now, death will eventually come, so the psychologist may assist the patient to develop a sense of purpose, and learn to live a finite life. The question of a final will and testament should be introduced by the psychologist at an appropriate time. This may include sorting out debts family obligations, land and property. It is the duty of the counselor to develop a plan for minimizing anxiety which is a major

problem of HIV/AIDS patients. On the other hand, the counselor should discuss sex and sexual relations and establish family support, and also that family members may need as much counseling as the patient. This type of counseling may prepare family members and friends for any eventuality.

Brannon and Feist [3] opined that the cost of being tested all the problems of arranging a health care visit, plus the distress that comes with the potential for bad news. Learning of HIV—Positive Status is a traumatic event, and people's learning of a positive result typically with increased anxiety, depression, anger, and distress. Coping processes can affect the amount of distress experienced by those who learn they are HIV positive, and psychological interventions can reduce their distress. Avoidance coping, such as denying reality or clinging to illusory hope, is associated with high levels of CD4+ Cells [21].

Nonetheless, for AIDS patients struggling with depression and negative feelings, cognitive behavioral stress management interventions have been successful in boosting adaptive coping and increasing social supports [22]. Active coping, including problem solving and seeking social supports, is related to better adjustment. Receiving support both from health care professionals and from family and friends leads to better adjustments [23]. In addition psychological interventions tailored to the people's specific situation and needs have advantages over less personalized programmes [24].

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Consequent upon the review of related literature, this study concludes that the roles of health psychologists are imperative and indispensable in the control and management of HIV/AIDS through early medical test, early commencement of treatment, and in adherence to medical instructions. Health psychologist is also imperative in helping HIV/AIDS victims to cope with the demand of the illness, and to prepare them for the ultimate.

Therefore, the paper recommends that the services of health psychologists be made available to all HIV/AIDS patients, by posting health psychologists to all health institutions where HIV/AIDS patients are being treated, and to create awareness on their roles and responsibilities through health education.

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