

# COVID-19 prevention education and awareness through community outreach

Stephen Engmann, Francis Adomah and Ninette Hayibor look at the role of primary care workforce

COVID-19 is a newly identified Severe Acute Respiratory infection caused by the novel Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-COV-2), that was first reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on 31 December 2019. The disease has spread rapidly among human populations on all continents around the world since it was first identified. It was initially declared by the WHO as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020, and was subsequently declared a pandemic on 11 March.<sup>1</sup>

The first two cases COVID-19 in Ghana were confirmed in March 2020.<sup>2</sup> Strategies adopted by the Government of Ghana to reduce community spread included hand hygiene, wearing of facemask, social distancing, basic cough etiquette, and education through various media (television, print and social media).<sup>2,3</sup> An audit of selected public transport stations in the Greater Accra region revealed that compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures was a challenge with social distancing and wearing of facemask being poorly observed.<sup>4</sup> With the recognition of the government's strategy to limit the spread of COVID-19, it was crucial to have an interaction with communities in the form of outreach to further disseminate these preventive measures. Any project carried out by an organisation or a group to transfer knowledge and skills for the benefit of a community is termed a Community Outreach Project (COP).<sup>5</sup>

This is a short report on a community project that was executed by the healthcare workforce of an urban primary care facility. The aim was to educate and create awareness of COVID-19 prevention in the communities within the catchment area of the Manna Mission Hospital of the Ledzokuku Municipality of Ghana.

## Description of communities

The Project was executed by the workforce of the Manna Mission Hospital, a primary care health facility, with support from the Christian Health Association of Ghana (CHAG). A total of eight communities within the Ledzokuku Municipality were reached. According to the Ghana Statistical Service District Analytical Report, the Municipality has a total population of 227,932. The predominant occupations of the people are trading and marketing, manufacturing, craftsmanship and related industries.<sup>7</sup> The eight communities that were reached

are Etsor, Akowor, Anomantu, Aloway, Fertilizer, Manna, Biashoye, and Sealady.

## Training of workforce

Before the community outreach, a workshop was organised for the workforce to train them on the prevention and control of COVID-19. Training of the workforce was done for two days from 26 August 2020, to 27 August 2020. Out of the trained workforce, 15 volunteered to embark on the community outreach project. Category of staff who went for outreach were mostly Community health and Public Health Nurses, Clinicians, and a few Non-Clinical Staff who had an interest in the project and were trained. The workforce team used educative materials such as posters and flyers donated by the Christian Health Association of Ghana (CHAG).

## Community outreach

The outreach began with a community entry where contacts were made with the elders and opinion leaders of the eight communities. The purpose of the outreach was explained to them and their support was sought for the outreach project to be undertaken. A total of 189 households were reached by the 15 health workers. Each household had an average of five members. The households were selected randomly. The outreach was done within three weeks, from 3-24 September 2020. When members of the outreach team arrived at a particular household, they introduced themselves and the work they do to the family members. The purpose of the outreach was explained to the family members and then COVID-19 prevention education was given to those present at the time of the visit. The education and awareness focused on how they can protect themselves against COVID-19.

They were encouraged to adhere to the following to prevent infection with COVID-19:

- Hand hygiene – frequent washing of hands with soap under running water and rubbing with alcohol-based hand sanitisers. This was to be done at home, church, market, office, bank, farm, school, lorry stations, after touching surfaces and use of the toilet. The team demonstrated to the households the right steps to follow during handwashing.
- Social distancing – always keeping a distance of about 1 to 2 meters from other people.
- Basic etiquette and wearing of facemask – they were to avoid touching the eyes, nose, and mouth. When coughing and sneezing, their mouths and nose must be covered with tissue or a bent elbow.

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Tissue must be disposed of into a closed dustbin immediately after use. Households were taught how to wear the facemask appropriately all the time, and its proper disposal after use.

They were encouraged to eat healthy foods like fruits and vegetables and exercise regularly. They were also encouraged to put on their facemask and report at the nearest health facility if they felt sick.

### Outcome and challenges

A few of the challenges encountered included language barrier which limited the coverage of more households in a day, however, interpreters from among the workforce assisted to enable such people to be reached. Furthermore, since the timing of the outreach was during working hours of the day, some family members were not at home at the time of the visit. A few people within the community also did not believe in the existence of the COVID-19 despite the media education and government interventions, hence their unwillingness to allow for education. Generally, members of the community were very receptive. Certain households requested free hand sanitisers and face masks, which the outreach teams did not have.

### Discussion

Health education within communities has been found to have a greater impact on the prevention of emerging infectious diseases resulting in reduced incidence of such diseases.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic is not an exception. This report has highlighted outcomes of the community outreach project that was executed by the workforce of an urban primary care Hospital in Ghana.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world have used different prevention strategies, ranging from imposing partial or total lockdowns to scaling up testing as well as contact tracing. However, health promotion can be undertaken through community education and risk communication at different levels to help the general public understand the risk and gravity of COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> This was what the community outreach by this workforce sought to achieve. The com-

munities reached were educated about the prevention and control of the disease. In China where the pandemic originated, General Practitioners were assigned to undertake community visits to facilitate public health education.<sup>8</sup> In the fight against COVID-19, the primary health care workforce has a key role to play in creating awareness of the disease and educating the communities that seek health care from their facilities.

There is a need to boost health education to improve public health awareness for COVID-19 among dwellers within communities. Through this community outreach project, the awareness of COVID-19 prevention and control, handwashing, and wearing of facemasks has increased. The increase in awareness was observed among many people wearing facemask when they visited the hospital and frequent washing of hands with soap under running water as well as the use of alcohol-based hand sanitisers. The primary health care workforce has a key role to play in their communities to reduce the community spread of COVID-19.

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