NCD advocacy: Why youth should be involved, and how you can help

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My name is 'Lola James; I am a young leader from Nigeria, and I'm 101% committed to reducing preventable deaths due to cancer and other NCDs.

My Story

As a kid, I would occasionally accompany my mum, who is a nurse, to work. She then worked at the infectious diseases hospital in Lagos, Nigeria.

My memories of the hospital included strong smell of disinfectant and an atmosphere filled with wailing mothers, innocent children groaning from excruciating pain, distraught and apprehensive relatives… I told my mum that I would someday be able to help families avoid this wave of unpleasant emotions.

Growing up as a lanky teenager, I almost forgot about my dream of preventing agony, distracted by the idea that modeling was my destiny. But after a brief stint as a model, I found I could not find fulfillment and always felt something was missing.

Fortunately, I was also a science student in college and it was pretty easy to return back to my 'first love'- Public Health! At the time when HIV, Malaria, Tuberculosis and Polio seemed to be the focus of most of my colleagues, I found inspiration in the words of an admired professor: 'prevention of cancer'. It felt like a light-bulb moment for me as I decided then on that I wanted to be nothing but a cancer control advocate.

What do you think, 'Lola?

Upon completion of my Masters in Public Health, I met a very passionate professor of Radiology, Prof Ifeoma Okoye, whose genuineness and sincerity is beyond infectious. Having been part of the African academia setting, professors are seen as people who should have everything all figured out.

During the initial stages of working with Prof Okoye she would call me up whenever she had ideas and would ask me

'…so, Lola, what do you think'? I would wonder to myself *'Is she trying to set me up? What could a kid fresh outta college possibly know?'*

After a couple of training courses, especially 'Prevention strategies for non-communicable diseases' at University of Oxford in the UK in 2012, I understood the concept of the shared risk factors between cancer and other non-communicable diseases and decided I had to expand my advocacy efforts to become a 'NCDs advocate'.

What boxes us in as 'youngsters'?

> *Inquisitiveness, passion and energy are special qualities of all youth that bind us together, irrespective of background*

Having been a NCDs control advocate for about 5 years, I am now convinced that the most valuable qualities of us youths are **inquisitiveness, passion** and **energy**!

These qualities bind young people together, irrespective of our background, culture and skin colour.

Young people are open to learning, highly resourceful, and awesome 'multi-taskers'. While sometimes criticized for being too idealistic, our idealism and optimism drives our commitment to our chosen cause.

> *For us youth NCD advocates, work is fun and fun is work!*

Thinking outside of squares

I once read about a study conducted by Microsoft that said that the attention span of the average 'Millennial' is now one second less than that of a gold fish. At first, this was worrisome to me, but then I saw a need to communicate the message of health in simpler ways that appeal more to today's youth. To me, it is a great opportunity to put our inquisitive mind, passion and energy to great use as young people. The article inspired me so much, that when the opportunity for a 2-6 months practicum was presented to me during my tenure as a Mandela Washington Fellow (A US Government initiative for young African leaders), I chose to intern at one of the best advertising firms in Nigeria, with a view to learning 'Creative Health Communication'. As young people, we can effectively communicate with one another in the common language and format that now appeals to us all.

> *Who else can most effectively communicate to youth than the youth themselves?*

On the platform of Breast Without Spot (BWS), I continually work with other youths under the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) scheme in various States in Nigeria to initiate and execute various campaigns and projects aimed at reducing preventable deaths due to cancer and other NCDs in Nigeria. With youth networks such as the YPCDN, [1] we are working on having our own 3T group in Lagos where various young professionals come together on the third Thursday of every month to share and execute ideas to combat the menace of NCDs. Other youths in countries like Kenya [2] and India already have 3T groups, they are popping up everywhere around the world.

A small, but important request from youth to elders: Please involve youth

In my Yoruba (Nigerian) culture, we'd say *'Bi omode ba l'aso bi agba, ko le ni akisa to agba'*… which literally means that *'even if a kid claims to possess as many clothes as an adult, he would never have accumulated as many rags as an adult'.*

Like my amazing Professor who showed such inspiring leadership by listening to me and providing me with opportunities to engage, *don't discount youth as naïve or inexperienced.* You can help bridge the gaps, while greatly benefiting from our infectious enthusiasm and commitment and fresh perspectives. Together, youth and elders make a winning team.

Let us make our own 'reasonable' mistakes, so that we can stand boldly like Thomas Edison did, to assert that we

haven't failed, but have only learnt 99 other ways of not doing it?

> *Mistakes don't mean we have failed, just that we have learnt some of the ways not to do it.*

We are extremely grateful to our role models for showing us the way, for helping us understand how it's being done. But we also crave the indulgence of elders: **please trust us *and step back far enough to catch a glimpse of us doing you proud****?*

Don't only see us as '*the leaders of tomorrow';* we are already leading right now!

We are the ***leaders of TODAY*** continuing the amazing work our mentors have taught us… only with a little bit of our own remix!

About the Author

Oluwafunmilola ('Lola) James, is National Project Manager at Breast Without Spot (BWS) [3]; @ayacnigeria [4]

'Lola has a Masters in Public Health and about five years experience working as a NCDs control advocate. 'Lola volunteers full-time with the BWS to initiate, plan, execute, monitor and evaluate various public health projects aimed at the primary and secondary prevention of cancer and other non-communicable diseases in Nigeria. 'Lola plans to get a PhD in Public Health/Cancer Epidemiology and hopes to occupy a leadership position where she can influence policies for favourable and sustainable cancer control in Nigeria and Africa. 'Lola was a youth representative at the first NCD Alliance Global Forum held in Sharjah in November 2015, where her speech to other youth and patient advocates inspired this blog.

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