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From Ebola to COVID-19: Reshaping Funerals and Burial Rites in Africa?

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Abstract

The coronavirus health crises is really changing the way people say goodbye to their loved ones. This is because corpses of victims who died as a result COVID-19 disease are recognised to be highly infectious and contagious with a great risk of the virus being transmitted by direct contact with the dead bodies. Memorial services are not allowed to be carried out with the presence of the corpse that resulted from the disease. Safety precautions are needed by the funeral homes when working with the deceased body. Some communities especially in Africa find it difficult accepting the health guidelines stipulating burials as it involves breaking their customs and traditions as regards to burial rites. Proper communication and management is thus needed in communities as regards to the methods involved in handling corpses of victims from the COVID-19. The acceptance of safe medical burials of the deceased by communities is a major component in the fight against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Safe burials; Communication; Local communities; COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 is changing the face of funeral services and burial rites. During the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and DRC one thing remained paramount. How were the dead going to be buried when African Communities are so attached to their traditional rites and customs? If some NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) at the time succeeded in sensitising the communities on the dangers of allowing corpses in homes because of culture and tradition, it was met with resistance as in the case of Sierra Leone. This was because most communities did not trust members involved in the Ebola response [1]. Contact with dead bodies of Ebola victims was common in West Africa which had been a major route for the transmission of the Ebolavirus [2]. In Sierra Leone, corpses of victims of Ebola were promptly taken and far away from family members. Safe burial teams were also hired

by the government [3]. In 2014, the WHO (World Health Organisation) made recommendations regarding 'safe burials' to reduce the transmission of the Ebola Virus [4]. Safe burials was done by trained burial teams with the use of appropriate personal protective equipment's, that required the corpse placed in a leak-resistant plastic body bag, followed by the body being buried at a depth of at least 2 metres [5]. The used personal protective equipment's by the burial team were later incinerated.

Many years down the line, many countries have not learned the Ebola lesson to manage the COVID-19 pandemic during burials. Proper communication is needed in communities especially in Africa on the methods surrounding handling of corpses of victims from the COVID-19.

Crisis Management and Communication

Today, many cases have been seen especially in Africa where family members cry foul and question a doctor's report on dead cases of COVID-19. When dead occurs as a result of the COVID-19 disease the corpse is buried within hours. The cry of many families today is that they did not give their loved ones befitting burial like the "African Man". In some African Societies when a person dies, no matter the disease cause, the corpse is washed, oiled and laid at home for viewing; a process known wake keeping. Is this a safe measure in the face of COVID-19 threat? NO

In some localities the entry and exit of corpses are banned. These are appropriate safety measures taken but without a crisis communication outlined to communities. How then should the communication be done involving management of burials so that the information is well assimilated by communities concerned without grudges and retaliation?

It is worth noting that most communities in Africa have no access to internet facilities and the social media. A communication strategy is thus needed at the level of local communities without necessarily broadcasting on television, radio and granting interviews to the press. This is an important step the crisis team (Interior and Health Ministries) will have to investigate and implement. It will define who is going to

communicate on behalf of the team and what strategic messages need to be prepared?

Outlined below are methods to be considered in communities as regards crises management and communication involving burial rites amid the COVID-19.

The main speaker (local communicator) for the Communities should be someone well recognised in the community. A foreigner or outsider might not be too smart enough to convince people he just met for the first time on how they should forgo their usual burial rites because of the COVID-19 pandemic. African traditional rulers and community heads should be used for this purpose.

In messaging the communities, alternative solutions for safe burial such as covering of disinfected corpse with transparent clothing and allowing the families to view as an alternative to touching the corpse is required.

The washing of the corpse should be replaced by sprays and pictures for the burial preparation allowed to be taken by the family for the memory of the departed.

Instead of allowing the locals to bury their loved ones, trained burial teams should be provided with protected gears to do the burying while the mourners stand at a distance.

The local communicator should contact a local faith representative at the request of the family members to arrange to make sure the deceased is buried in a dignified manner.

What will be the best channels to target the population concerned? What is the relevant media to use to pass across the message?

In communities where internet coverage is low it is advisable to use community radio stations.

Short educational videos on health risk in burials needs to be created and transmitted across television channels.

The use of large billboards and posters will also be relevant for efficient communication of salient messages involving burials.

Lastly, local leaders need to be dispatched to meet houses to pass across the messages in vernacular (local languages) and also with the help of local “town criers” (village messengers).

It is also necessary for “Safe Burials Save Lives” campaigns to be promoted in local communities. Such campaigns is of extreme importance in these communities so as to spread messages of care and caution involving the handling of dead bodies and that safe burials help prevent the COVID-19 virus transmission. Refresher trainings on medical burial safety can be introduced in local communities.

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