NATIONAL HEALTH PROMOTION POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DEPRESSION SCREENING FOR ADULTS ATTENDING PRIMARY HEALTH CARE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The concept of prevention in national health promotion policy includes early diagnosis through regular screening for diseases such as depression and prompt treatment of afflicted persons to promote, prevent complications and improve health response outcome. The review assessed the implementation of the national health promotion policy and its roles in facilitating depression screening for adults in primary healthcare in Nigeria. The methodology employed was searching of databases for the selection of n=22 articles that met the inclusion criteria. The selected articles were collated, analysed, and the results interpreted. The results revealed that the existing national health promotion policy should be expanded to include depression screening in primary health care. In conclusion, health promotion policy implementation on depression screening in primary health care is not receiving the deserved attention. It is recommended that policymakers and stakeholders should encourage a task-shifting approach for the successful implementation of depression screening in primary care in Nigeria.

Keywords: Depression Screening, Implementation, National Health Promotion Policy, Nigeria

Introduction

The National Mental Health Act [NMHA] 2021 stated that screening for mental health problems should be incorporated as part of the routine clinical assessment in primary health care (Kareem et al., 2023). The first National Health Promotion Policy [NHPP] in Nigeria was approved and adopted at the 49th National Council on Health meeting held in the year 2006, and was formally launched at the 50th National Council on Health (NCH) meeting on 11th January 2007 for implementation at the national, state and primary healthcare levels in the country. After a decade of implementation of the National Health Promotion Policy and due to emerging new trends in Health Promotion practices, the Federal Ministry of Health in the year 2016 revised NHPP (2006) in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. The revised version of the national health promotion policy was approved and adopted at the 62nd National Council on Health meeting held in Asaba, Delta State, from 9th to 13th September, 2019 (FMoH, 2019).

The National Health Promotion Policy (NHPP, 2006) is expected to play a significant role in the routine screening of adults for depression in primary health care, as its goal is to reduce the burden of diseases in Nigeria. Globally, researchers have found that depression is present in 10% to 20% of adult patients attending primary care (Siniscalchi et al., 2020). In Africa, 29.2 million people suffer from depression, with 3.9% affected in Nigeria. The condition is largely undetected early, partly due to limited or lack of regular screening of adults for depression in primary health care services (Abdulbaqi et al., 2025; Adewuya et al., 2022; Akorede, 2024; Sani et al., 2024). According to Adewuya et al. (2022), there are growing concerns that without routine screening of adults for depression, coupled with the active participation of primary health care workers in case-finding, the burden of the disease — which includes self-harm and suicide that claim hundreds of thousands of lives yearly — might not reduce appreciably.

The National Primary Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA, 2016) stated that the policy statement of the National Health Promotion Policy is that interventions will be adequately resourced and deployed effectively to address the increasing burden of diseases, public health challenges, and social determinants of health. The policy aims to make a positive contribution to the improvement of human health using cost-effective approaches that facilitate preventive measures and increase individual, family, community, and social participation in health (NPHCDA, 2018).

The concept of prevention in the health promotion policy includes early diagnosis through regular screening of adults for depression and prompt treatment to improve health response outcomes (FMoH, 2019). However, the implementation of the National Health Promotion Policy since 2006 in Nigeria has not positively impacted routine adult depression screening in primary care (WHO, 2021). This may be partly due to limited screening services, poor accessibility, negative perceptions, attitudes, and other barriers to routine adult depression screening in primary health care.

Conceptual Framework

The implementation of the national health promotion policy is core to the Primary Health Care concept of reaching larger communities through the involvement of primary health care workers. Part of the PHC responsibilities is to prevent and treat diseases of public health priority that were responsible for high morbidity, disability, and mortality (National Health Policy, 2016). The World Health Organization concepts of three pillars for the delivery of health promotion namely, good governance,

health literacy and healthy city is the conceptual framework adapted to establish the connection between primary health care workers and implementation of national health promotion policy (WHO, 2020).

Good governance entails implementing clear policies, developing regulations and legislation that would make screening of diseases at primary health care accessible and affordable to ensure sustainability of the program in the communities (WHO, 2021). Health literacy brings about empowerment of individual to make the healthiest choice and make decisions for themselves and their families. According to WHO (2020), it can be achieved through organizing awareness program that will improve knowledge about the diseases. Healthy cities involve prioritizing policies that create synergy between health and other healthy public health policies to promote health equity, social inclusion and re-orienting health services for equity at primary care.

The concept articulated by WHO (2021) is relevant to implementation of health promotion policy in primary health care. Application of the concepts to depression screening is a strategy towards increasing accessibility to depression screening services in primary health care (WHO, 2020). Good governance and healthy policies on depression screening will encourage early detection and prompt treatment of afflicted adult's population thereby reducing the burden of the disease. Health literacy will create awareness and improve primary health care workers knowledge on depression screening which eventually will reduce the prevalence of depression and lead to healthy cities in Nigeria.

The purpose of this study is to explore the implementation of National Health Promotion Policy in Nigeria and its effects in facilitating screening of the adults for depression in primary care. The specific objectives are to: (i) review health policies documents that implement adults depression screening in primary care; (ii) assess implementation of National Health Promotion Policy (NHPP) on adults depression screening in primary care; (iii) describe policy gap on adults depression screening; (iv) discuss the role of primary healthcare workers on policy implementation, (v) recommendations on depression screening.

This study is justifiable as it analysed the implementation of the national health promotion policy at primary care with regard to routine adults' depression screening for early detection and prompts actions to reduce the burden of the disease in Nigeria. This study is of significance as it enables stakeholders and policymakers to track implementation of the national health promotion policy on routine adults' depression screening in primary health care in Nigeria.

Methodology

Study design

This study analysed the National Health Promotion Policy in relation to the facilitation of screening of adults for depression in primary health care. The study was conducted in January 2024 to assess the implementation of the policy. Various databases were searched for relevant learned journals to access published studies. Relevant articles on "National Health Promotion Policy" and "Depression Screening in Primary Health Care" were identified. Databases searched included EBSCO, PubMed, Cochrane database, CINAHL, Wiley online library, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science.

The keywords used for the search are "National Health Promotion policy", "Policy on Health Promotion", "Depression Screening", "Primary Health Care", and "Conceptual Framework on Health Promotion". The total number of articles identified was n=83, but N=22 were investigated based on the purpose of the study. Data collected from relevant studies were analysed with a focus on the objectives of the study. The national health promotion policy was analysed in relation to the implementation of the routine adults' depression screening in primary healthcare in Nigeria.

Articles Selection Procedure

Articles were screened to identify relevant studies; duplicate articles were removed based on their title and abstracts. Also, articles were screened based on full-text reading to ascertain the accuracy of the selection judgments. All the authors contributed and the final search was conducted on 31st of March, 2024.

Inclusion Criteria: The studies included were those articles that met the following criteria: (i) described a study related to depression screening; (ii) articles on health promotion in Nigeria.

Exclusion Criteria: Studies published in French, Spanish, or any other language which are not in English language were excluded due to difficulty in translation of the findings.

Results

Databases searched yielded N=83 articles after collation. A total of n=21 articles were identified as duplicates and removed. Considering the title and abstract, n=30 articles were excluded then yielding n=32 articles that are relevant to the study. Then n=32 articles were further screened and reviewed by full text, n=10 articles were excluded (n=03 article on intervention not targeting health promotion; n=04 not peer reviewed; and n=03 not in English). Thus, among the n=32 articles screened, n=22 were identified for inclusion in the study as in the PRISMA flow chart in Figure 1.

The results revealed that a total of 22 articles were included; intervention program on health promotion (10/22, 45%); developmental strategic plan on health promotion (01/22, 4.5%); articles on depression screening intervention (06/22, 27.5%); and articles on implementation of health promotion (05/22, 23%).

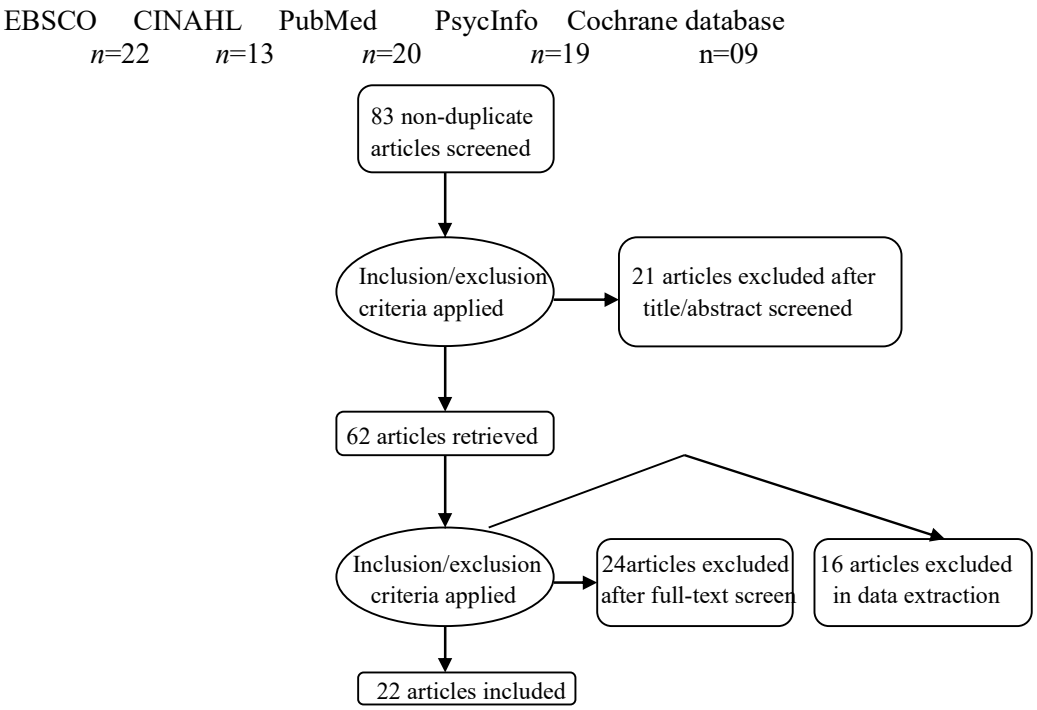

Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart of the selected articles

Discussion

Evidence-Based Policy Review

Policies on Screening for Depression in Primary Health Care

Health promotion is achieved through implementation of various policies that ensure that depression services are accessible and available to empower adults' population and sustain them in optimal health and wellness. Hence, the national health policies documents were reviewed to identify those that support and promote depression screening in primary care settings. Relevant statement from specific policy documents analysed and translated as in Table 1.

Table 1: policies that support adults depression screening in primary health care

Health Policies	Support for Health Promotion	Promote Adults' Depression Screening in PHC
National Health Promotion Policy 2016.	i). Health promotion should make informed decisions and empower individual, groups, and communities about their health; ii). Health promotion priorities should include communicable and non-communicable diseases that reflect the need of Nigerian like depression.	Not included in the policy document.
National Primary Health Care Development Agency Management Guideline For Primary Health Care Under One Roof 2016	i). The ward minimum health care package should include health promotion and community mobilization.	Not included in the policy document
National Health Act 2014.	i). The highest policy making body in Nigeria is the National Council on Health that preside over matters relating to health promotion and maintenance.	Not included in the policy document.
Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030.		i). Strengthen effective leadership and governance for mental health promotion; ii). Provide comprehensive, integrated and responsive mental health and social care services to promote mental health in the community-based settings; iii). Implement strategies for promotion and prevention in mental health;

		iv). Strengthen information systems, evidence and research for mental health promotion.
National Mental Health Act (NMHA) 2021		i). Depression as one of the common mental health problem should be incorporated as part of the routine clinical assessment; ii). A strong community-based with focus on promotion of mental health in primary care; iii). A well-defined governance structure to support and drive depression promotion implementation; iv). Promote and protects human right of persons with depression condition; v). Address the critical funding gap to promote mental health.
Lunacy Act CAP 524 of the Law of Nigeria 1958.	i). discriminatory and discretionary in nature; ii). It is far from the World Health Organization (WHO)'s definition of mental health and person who suffer mental health issues; iii). Derogatory to people with mental health needs which is a violation of human rights.	Not included in the policy document.
Lunacy Ordinance 1916.	Mentally sick people should be treated separately in isolation.	Not included in the policy document.

Implementation of NHPP and Adult Depression Screening

Singh (2021) emphasised that the National Health Promotion Policy has a key role to play in ensuring that primary health care workers facilitate and conduct routine depression screening for adults in primary health care centres. Primary health care workers are frontline health providers who are trained to cover a broad scope of practice and are qualified to make valuable contributions to health promotion policy implementation programs (WHO, 2020). In reality, primary health care workers, besides their other routine clinical assessments, have played a minimal role in screening adults for depression in primary care, which is an important aspect of the National Health Promotion Policy implementation program (Kareem et al., 2023).

The analysis of the National Health Promotion Policy revealed the importance of calling for collective action and stakeholder support through advocacy for behavioural change in primary care to achieve the goals of the policy. In addition, there is a lack of frameworks and screening guidelines for depression in primary health care, which are critical for systematic planning and management of the screening process. Furthermore, the revised National Health Promotion Policy (2016) reported that although there are various health promotion programs in primary health care, poor implementation of the policy has led to shortfalls in several preventive programs.

Screening for diseases is a secondary prevention and intervention measure that should be readily accessible and sustainable for cost-effectiveness in prevention strategies (Kareem et al., 2023; WHO, 2020). In addition, an action plan for adult depression screening must be clearly stated to sustain preventive measures as stipulated in the National Mental Health Act (2021). In effect, the availability of depression screening guidelines will facilitate the achievement of the goals of the policy on disease prevention and health promotion in primary care (Singh, 2021). The review of the National Health Promotion Policy also revealed a lack of capacity and responsiveness in screening adults for depression in primary care.

Policy Gap on Adult Depression Screening

The **s**creening of adults for depression at the primary health care level is the key towards delivery of the World Health Organization integrated depression care (WHO, 2021). Though there are limited enabling national policies on both children and adults' depression screening at primary healthcare level. Hence, national health promotion policy on depression screening is poorly implemented or targeted towards certain clients with terminal disease condition. Therefore, the importance of the screening for depression in primary healthcare may not be appreciated by non-mental health specialist. In reference to the comprehensive mental health action plan 2013–2030 (Singh, 2021), primary healthcare workers need to work together to strengthen depression care through implementation of health promotion policies to address depression problem in Nigeria. The comprehensive strategy is endorsed by the National Council on Health which is the highest health policy making body in Nigeria.

Role of PHC Workers on Depression Screening Implementation

Significant evidence from studies indicated that large proportions of depression are undetected due to unresponsiveness of the primary healthcare workers to routine adults' depression screening (Diószegi et al., 2023; Pfoh et al., 2020; Sample et al., 2020; Yildirim et al., 2022). According to Adewuya et al. (2021), many primary healthcare systems in Nigeria both private and public are yet to respond adequately to the burden of depression disorder. Qureshi et al. (2023) suggested that responsiveness is imperative towards achieving an intrinsic goal of the National Health Promotion Policy on prevention of non-communicable and the process involves multiple interactions within the health system in Nigeria.

Undoubtedly, primary healthcare workers are expected to improve individual overall health and wellness. They can significantly decrease or reduce the burden of disability due to depression through early screening and prompt treatment. Thus, primary healthcare workers must integrate routine adults' depression screening into their services during initial clinical assessment since they are saddled with the responsibility of implementing national health promotion policy in the context of prevention which is the target and main goal of the primary health care in Nigeria.

Primary healthcare workers can also reduce the risk factors associated with depression and prevent or reverse the disease through regular screening to identify afflicted person early and treat appropriately. They are trained experts who can mitigate depression through secondary prevention to promote overall health and wellness of the people. The analysis of the National Health Promotion Policy 2016 shows that there is little understanding of the health promotion concepts and consumers rights. There is need to call for collective action and request support from the stakeholders for behavioural change at primary health care level to achieve the goals of the policy.

The available epidemiological evidences on prevention shows that regular screening of the population for diseases plays a major role in health promotion intervention. Depression disorder is a non-communicable disease that is preventable and non-transmissible disease that has slow progression caused and is caused by genetic or behavioural factors (WHO, 2019). According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), depression can be reversed by lifestyle modification through health promotion. Conversely, the primary healthcare workers are yet to recognize they have a key role to play in promoting screening of the adults for depression.

Presently, there is less commitment to adults' depression screening in primary care to sustain preventive measures rather more resources are committed to treatment instead of preventing and promoting overall health and wellness of the populace. In effect, the implementation of national health promotion policy requires clear action plan on adults' depression screening to achieve the goal of the policy on disease promotion and prevention in the primary health care.

Recommendations

A pragmatic step should be taken to develop and provide workable guideline to ensure depression screening is translated into primary health care services in Nigeria. Stakeholders, primary healthcare workers and policymakers should collaborate on health policy implementation to improve responsiveness in the primary health care settings. Health promotion policy and health system research should be incorporated into practice in the primary healthcare level in Nigeria with emphasis on depression screening.

Conclusion

In conclusion, effective implementation of national health promotion policy by primary health care workers will improve detection and reduce the burden of depression disorder among the adults' populace in Nigeria. The existing national health promotion policy should be expanded to include depression screening in primary care. This is the time for primary health care workers in Nigeria to consider their active involvement in the routine clinical assessment of depression for early detection and prompt action.

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