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COVID-19 PANDEMIC: WAY FORWARD FOR NIGERIA

The global pandemic coronavirus disease (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is having great impact on the health, social and economic structure of countries around the world. The latest statistics from the World Health Organization (22nd March 2020) shows a total of 292,142 confirmed cases and 12,784 deaths globally. On the same date, there were already over 600 confirmed cases and 12 deaths in Africa. Unfortunately, Nigeria has recorded 30 cases of COVID-19 with no fatality. Thus, there is an urgent need to prevent the occurrence of new cases especially through local transmission, and to maintain the zero-fatality rate.

To achieve this, we make the following recommendations to support the on-going COVID-19 prevention and management plans by the Presidential Taskforce, Federal Ministry of Health and Nigeria Centre for Diseases Control (NCDC).

Recommendations to the Government

1. Indeed, government needs to take the lead in the containment of this pandemic especially now that cases of local transmission have started to occur.
2. Both offensive and defensive approach should be used to curb this situation. Aside temperature screening, laboratory services should be provided in all states. Currently, only five laboratories have the capacity to test effectively for COVID-19 which increases the testing time. There is a need to establish laboratories capable of testing for COVID-19 in all states of the federation as a matter of urgency.
3. Isolation centers should also be provided in all states.
4. In order to achieve substantial results via contact tracing, while local transmission is being curtailed, there is a need to close all borders (land, sea and air).
5. There is a need for urgent training of designated healthcare workers to handle cases in the facilities in all states.
6. There is an urgent need to establish Emergency Operation Centers (EOC) in all states, to be coordinated by a national center. Professionals who are knowledgeable about viral infectious diseases should be engaged in these centers. This is not the time to play sentiment using people who have little knowledge and experience with regards to COVID-19 containment. The Presidential Taskforce should also galvanize expertise across the country.
7. The ban on public gatherings, which is already in effect, is highly commendable and must be enforced throughout the federation. To control the spread of the virus, it is important to limit all activities or gatherings of large numbers of people (such as religious, social, political and academic) for a minimum of two weeks.
8. To ensure that the ban on public gatherings achieve the desired outcome, it is necessary to limit inter-state and intra-state movement. This will be the only way to exclude non-essential travels that may be the unintended outcome of sitting at home.



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9. The principle of self-quarantine, which is alien to most Nigerians and exceptionally difficult to observe given the communal nature of our society, must be properly explained and supervised through public awareness and enlightenment campaigns (using local languages and infographics) for effective results to be achieved.
10. There is an urgent need for funds to be provided at both national and states level to build capacity and emergency preparedness throughout this containment exercise.

Recommendations to the Scientific Community

1. Virologists, disease epidemiologists and other relevant professionals should meet in states to deliberate and review actions as peculiar to the states. Such meetings, which may be coordinated virtually, should lead to weekly reports until the end of the outbreak. This effort should be coordinated by state governments.
2. This is also the time for better collaboration and sharing of ideas among scientists for the purpose of achieving a common goal.
3. There is a need for a combined effort in dealing with this pandemic such as collaborative execution of laboratory diagnosis, sharing of laboratory facilities and review of protocols.
4. Financial support should be provided for reagents and consumables by institutions and states. This is critical to testing of large numbers of samples.

Recommendations to the Community

1. There is a need for all to be calm and follow all rules as regards respiratory and personal hygiene. At the minimum, each individual should maintain clean surroundings and use hand sanitizers while coming out of public places.
2. In a bid to prevent the disease, individuals should desist from unwholesome practices such as self-medication and drug abuse.
3. There is a need to be at alert and to inform the health facilities of any suspected case.
4. Community leaders of all ranks as well as the media can, and should, play a key role in public awareness about personal and respiratory hygiene.
5. It is the responsibility of all and sundry to help limit the spread of the virus by avoiding overcrowding and gatherings of large numbers of people above 20.
6. Many of us may know someone who can help. It is therefore necessary to recommend those who are professional experts to government. Our collective success depends on an apolitical approach, as we need to use the right people to handle critical responsibilities.
7. Donors are needed to provide financial support for the purchase of survival materials, laboratory reagents and consumables.

Conclusion

The NYA will continue to support the Government and research community in finding an immediate solution to emerging health problems. We, therefore aimed to work with different organisations to ensure minimal impact of COVID-19 across the country.



Dr Abiodun Egbetokun

President

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