

FIRST AID VERSUS SELF-MEDICATION: ANY DIFFERENCE?

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, first aid was defined as the emergency treatment administered to an injured or sick person before professional medical care is available.¹ First aid is also referred to as the initial assistance or treatment given at the site of accident to someone who is injured or suddenly taken ill, before the arrival of an ambulance.² It can be inferred from these definitions that first aid is not the only care given to a sick person. It is given in emergency situation. Though some drugs can be used as first aid the use of drugs without prescription must be distinguished from first aid care.

Self-medication is widespread in Nigeria. It is understandable that the only available form of health care in some of our communities in Nigeria is only the point of sale of over the counter drugs. Hawking of drugs is not uncommon in most of our rural and urban communities. In such places, one tablet each of several drugs may be dispensed to the patient. Several drug interactions may therefore occur leading to harmful consequences in addition to delaying appropriate treatment.

Nothing stops one from purchasing over the counter medication to quickly relieve discomfort. However, when it becomes a routine such is no longer first aid but self-medication. A common form of self-medication in Nigeria is the Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). In the bid for health especially in poor resource settings like ours some resort to CAM.

Some CAM and other drugs used as self-medication are said to cure multiple ailments. Some claim that some herbal preparations cure diseases that orthodox medicines do not have an absolute cure for but can only manage e.g. hypertension, diabetes and HIV/AIDS. These offers are no doubt attractive and have resulted in many patients defaulting in their orthodox treatments. Some later return to the health facilities with more advanced diseases or complications. A lot of the people patronising CAM believe that it is better than orthodox medicine.³ Diverse extract from plants and animals have been used to treat malaria, and other diseases.^{4,5}

Though many have attributed success to the use of self-medication, the destructive effect is usually insidious since its toxicity does not manifest immediately.

Self-medication might have been of help to a very few. It must however, be condemned with passion owing to its dangerous and devious effect. It is therefore imperative as health workers to pay more attention to the history of drug use by our patients particularly those pretending to be giving first aid care. We should be actively involved in the provision of first-hand information to our patients in order to ensure drug safety. More studies are also required in the area of self-medication until proven solution is provided to this menace.

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