

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PRACTICE IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This paper examined the challenges, benefits and future prospects of professionalization of environmental health practice in Nigeria. It saw the exercise as very advantageous, both to the public and to environmental health officers. The paper encouraged environmental health officers to rise to the occasion and use the opportunity of their recognition as a fully-fledged profession to take the nation to the peak of environmental sanitation. Government was also advised to fully provide financial, material and moral support to environmental health officers to enable them discharge the professional assignments creditably.

Keywords: *Environmental Health, Profession, License, Accreditation, Council*

Introduction

The issue of professionalization of Environmental health practice in Nigeria is very topical especially at a time when Nigerians are fully conscious of the fact that our environment deserves amelioration to suit the healthful existence of man. It is also an opportunity to remind stakeholders in environmental health practice of the enormous responsibility bestowed on them by law and ethics of the profession.

There is the wrong notion that virtually every human being is a sanitarian. This may account for why in many states of the federation all manner of persons are engaged to discharge the function of Environmental Health Officers irrespective of whether such persons have the requisite background and training.

This raises the next series of questions as to who are Environmental Health Officers. For instance, parents teach their children simple hygienic practices of toileting, hand washing and bathing; the school staffs instruct their pupils; lecturer's in colleges of education teach their students health education and basic sanitation rules; contractors are employed to cart away refuse, etc. Are all these groups' not handling environmental health duties? But are they all really Environmental Health Officers? Are there certain things, skills and techniques that are lacking in their handling of environmental health functions? The answer is yes. The essence of that difference constitutes what makes environmental health practice a profession. The major focus of this paper is to examine the concept, context and practice of Environmental Health from a professional viewpoint. To what extent is environmental health practice a profession?

What is a Profession?

The status of a profession is usually based on its claim to, or legal monopoly of some specialized knowledge acquired through systematic training, even though the actual posture of the profession in the society will ultimately depend on the value which the beneficiaries and the public place on the services rendered by the profession. Therefore in considering Environmental Health Practice as a profession, we may use two parameters.

1. By considering to what extent Environmental Health Practice measures up to the characteristics of a profession.

2. By considering whether or not there is practical evidence that Environmental Health Officers are aspiring to professionalization.

The first parameter which considers to what extent Environmental Health Practice measures up to the characteristics of a profession has the following advantages:

- (a) It provides a simple classification device for judging the extent to which Environmental Health has attained professional status.
- (b) It reveals to Environmental Health Officers and other occupational groups, what qualities they need to achieve status of a profession.

According to Nwankwo (1982), a profession is an occupation or a vocation or trade, requiring formal education, public recognition and special licence to practice. On their part, Gordon et al (1983) sees a profession as desirable and defined occupation with an implication of intellectual training and largely mental expertise.

From the definitions stated above, a profession requires formal education, as well as license to practice. It therefore follows that a professional is a person who makes a business or full time commitment to a vocation, which others might do for pleasure. From the foregoing definition, it is certain that anybody who practices Environmental Health or claims to be an Environmental Health Officer without the stipulated attributes is not an Environmental Health Officer. A profession is an occupation, which performs a crucial social function.

Professional development is therefore defined as increased growth and advancement in knowledge; skills, attitude and sophistication needed for continued effective performance of both, the profession and its members. The history of professional development of Environmental Health officers and Environmental Health profession in Nigeria is that of gradual but and systematic movement towards progress.

Characteristics of a Profession

Nwankwo (1982), opined that for a vocation, occupation or trade to qualify as a profession, it must possess the following attributes

1. A profession offers a unique, definite and essential service to the public. The services are different from others, and those who render them are quite clearly identifiable from other service groups.
2. The training and preparation for a profession takes a long time. This is because the techniques required for a profession are both intellectual and intricate.
3. In professionalism, emphasis is on intellectual techniques rather than physical capabilities. The professional is expected to use his intellect in making decision concerning his work. He/she does not necessarily depend on or wait for instruction before he/she can tackle a confronting problem.
4. A profession enjoys a broad range of autonomy for the professionals and the occupational group. This is so because the skills and services required in a profession involve intricate situational contingencies, which only those who are qualified have the autonomy to decide upon.
5. The professional assumes a high degree of responsibility for their actions. Every professional member or practitioner accepts broad personal responsibility for judgments made and acts performed within the autonomy granted them. The professional does what he does because he knows it is right to do them rather than because he is asked to do them.
6. A profession must have a strong, virile and comprehensive self-governing organization or union which links all practitioners together, and which can defend the interest of

members against public abuse or interference. According to Ndu et al (1997), a profession must possess professional code ethics for regulating and controlling the conduct of its practitioners.

7. Ability of the professional to demonstrate competence through passing some prescribed examination usually organized by an approved body.
8. Believe in continuous in- service training for growth. Our society is dynamic, so is knowledge, skills and techniques.
9. Affords life-long vocation/career and permanent membership.

Examination of Environmental Health Practice against the Checklist of Conditions for Professionalism

Examining environmental health practice with a checklist to ascertain its professional status reveals enormous justifications for the field to be considered as a profession .This is fully discussed below.

(a) Offering a unique, definite and essential service to the public. In Nigeria today and even in the colonial era, Environmental Health officers (then called sanitary Inspectors) were and are still involved in rendering unique, exclusive, specialized and systematic occupational knowledge, to members of the public. Environmental health duties have numerous technique and strategies for practice. These include routine house-to-house inspection; periodic factory and food premises inspection, health education of members of the public in specific setting, school health screening and services, disinfestations exercise, etc. The implication of this is that not just anybody can be an Environmental Health Officer. Environmental Health Officers have to be highly socialized for their general and specific functions in the society. Hence, Environmental Health Practice in Nigeria satisfies this first condition for professionalism.

(b) Acquisition of esoteric knowledge and expertise through long period of advanced education and training: This condition implies that members of a given profession have to be specially trained, and thoroughly knowledgeable in the subject matter and of their profession. In London and America, the lowest entry qualification for Environmental Health Officers is Bachelor of Science (B.Sc). In Nigeria, the West Africa Health Examination Board's three (3) year programme has been dropped. What is now in vogue is the four (4) year HND programme. Other programmes at B.Sc level still exist. These are the baseline qualifications for Environmental Health Officers in Nigeria thus satisfying the academic requirement for professionalism. Many Environmental Health officers have in addition taken up programmes like pollution control, industrial toxicology, waste management and Environmental management etc Furthermore, there exist many continuing education programmes at degree and higher degree levels in Nigerian universities which complement HND offered by colleges of Health Technology in Nigeria. These programmes have helped and are still helping to give further professional training to thousands of Nigeria Environmental Health Officers in Nigeria. Thus, one can rightly claim that Environmental Health practice has attained professional status.

(c) Possession of a Closely Knit Organization with Group Consciousness

The Environmental Health officers Association of Nigeria (EHOAN) exists at both national and state levels. The organization is not only active but also innovative. At present, there is no fragmentation as seen in some professional groups. This has made it possible for members to speak with one voice.

(d) Services Oriented in the best interest of society (for purposes of satisfying some specific social/health needs)

Environmental health duties/practice is a social/health activity that is essentially serving humanity. Doctors and lawyers may deal with single individuals but Environmental Health officers' deals with both individual and groups at the same time. This makes the foundation of the EHO exclusively unique. Environmental health practice in Nigeria satisfies this condition as a profession.

(a) Possession of Professional Code of Ethics for Regulating and Controlling the Conduct of its Practitioners

In this respect, Okonkwo and Ozurumba (1989) have stated that codes of ethics are values, guides, social control principles, which govern the conduct of members of an organization. They are not, of course, legal documents; rather they are principles that have their roots in morals. They help decide what is right or wrong in a professional body. Expectedly, there is a set of rules and regulations governing the behaviour and conduct of Environmental Health Officers in Nigeria. These exist side by side with the rights and privileges of members of the profession. In sum, it could be concluded that environmental health vocation had developed to attain the status of a noble profession in Nigeria and beyond.

Differences between Environmental Health Profession and other Professions.

- 1 Other professionals or practitioners deal with one client at a time whereas environmental health officers deal with more than one client at a time.
- 2 In environmental health profession, the client relationship is supposed to be adult to adult, while in some professions e.g. teaching, the client - practitioner relationship is supposed to be adult (senior) to child (junior).
- 3 With the environmental health professional, the practice, treatment or service is often at various locations e.g. private premises, institutions, public establishments with clients performing and acting as directed but in other professions, treatment or service to client is often in a private room or office.
- 4 The service meeting or treatment goes on for eight hours a day and 365 days in a year, whereas in other professions the service meeting or treatment is held by appointment and the contact period is usually short.
- 5 In environmental health profession, a multiplicity of problems must be dealt with simultaneously; continuously or constantly whereas in other professions the client usually consults the practitioners on one specific problem at a time.
- 6 In environmental health profession, the results of treatment or service are long range and not often immediately determined while in other professions, the results of treatment or service are tangible and immediate.
- 7 In environmental health profession, the legal responsibility rests with several people including the practitioners, the government and members of the public who are also stakeholders, whereas in other professions, the legal responsibility rests with the practitioners.
- 8 In environmental health profession, it is certain that the client has no choice in the selection of the practitioners, whereas in other professions, the client is at liberty to choose his practitioners as he wishes or as his case demands.

Who is an Environmental Health Officer?

An Environmental Health officer or Sanitarian is a public health professional who protects public health and controls detrimental conditions in man's environment through education, consultation, regulation, and investigation and expert suggestions. Thus, environmental health is a broad field of study that deals with the management or amelioration of factors in the environmental, which if left untamed, will interfere adversely with public health. Control of environmental conditions has become increasingly important to protect and maintain the health of man as well as his sense of well being. Environmental health officers' work towards reducing risks and eliminating dangers to human health associated with the living and working environment. Environmental Health Officers are licensed before they could practice in UK, America and Nigeria etc

Environmental Health officer provides expertise in the following public health areas:-

- (a) Food service sanitation and food safety.
- (b) Housing and attendant nuisance control.
- (c) Public health nuisance control
- (d) Fostering safe and sanitary conditions in public swimming pools, recreational areas, youth camp, resorts, fairs, festivals, hotels and motels.
- (e) Sewage treatment and disposal
- (f) Indoor air quality control.
- (g) Water supplies and water quality
- (h) Solid and hazardous waste management and disposal to ensure that health and safety conditions are maintained.
- (i) Control of communicable diseases: the environmental health officer functions in this capacity through the various immunization programmes specific disease control and surveillance programmes, as well as other measures aimed at breaking the link in the chain of transmission of both endemic and epidemic diseases.
- (j) Consulting and education: Environmental health officers proactively participate on teams promoting safe living conditions for children, older adults, migrant workers and other vulnerable populations. He is therefore a polyvalent officer, an administrator and one whose training has opened his vision and horizon to appreciate what goes on in his total environment.

To this extent everybody cannot be an Environmental health officer. This point should be made clear because some politicians and administrators see environmental health duty as an all comers affair. Such duties have been used to offer political patronage to party stalwarts. This is a disservice to the nation, and should be stopped forthwith. It is clear from the position of this paper that Environmental Health Practice goes beyond mere refuse disposal. There are more complex and intricate duties such as environmental monitoring, pollution control, industrial toxicology, pest control, food poisoning and animal welfare. It is a combination of understanding, intellectual analysis of health problems, creativity control and evaluation.

Conclusion

This paper has succeeded in projecting Environmental Health Practice as a noble profession. It's practice in Nigeria has attained the requirements for a full profession. Happily, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo signed the Environmental Health Officers Council Bill into Law and the Council was consequently inaugurated at Abuja on the 15th of March 2004. The Council now sees to the accreditation, certification, and registration in the environmental health profession.

The implication therefore, is that it calls for discipline and commitment on the part of Environmental Health Officers to move their profession and their Council forward.

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