Feature Article

Hosting the 16th AHILA Conference in Ibadan, Nigeria: organization, achievements, challenges and lessons learnt

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Abstract
Attending a scientific conference offers researchers several potential benefits including opportunity to present and receive constructive feedback from professional colleagues. Organizing such conference is also beneficial to the hosts who can acquire skills for coordination, communication and networking. However, the process is fraught with many challenges. One hundred and nine professionals attended the 16th AHILA conference from 22 countries in Africa, Europe and United States of America. The conference agenda was balanced, integrating skills acquisition, information for career development, sources of evidence-based free e-resources, including databases, and e-books for libraries covering health-related topics. This article describes achievement, challenges and lessons learnt in hosting the conference and could serve as a guide for health information professionals planning a similar conference in the future.

Key words: *AHILA conference; health information professionals; medical librarians; health and well-being; health literacy; Nigeria.*

Background

Attending scientific conferences is a primary means of continuing education for researchers. Conferences provide a forum for researchers to present their work to their colleagues and receive feedback. Scientific meetings are also settings where researchers learn about what their colleagues are investigating, get insights on new research ideas, learn new methodology of conducting research and network with professional colleagues from different institutions around the world (1). Organizing scientific meetings is beneficial for the hosts in several ways. It creates opportunity for networking, development of skills for communication, teamwork and organization (2). It also increases visibility for organizers among professional colleagues (3). However, making a commitment to host a scientific meeting is a huge responsibility fraught with many potential challenges. The authors organized and hosted the 16th Biennial Conference of the Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA) held on October 14-18, 2019 at the Otunba Subomi Balogun Conference Centre, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. We present in this article the process of organizing the conference, the achievements recorded, challenges and lessons learnt in hosting the conference to guide health information professionals who plan to host a similar conference in the future.

Founded in 1984, AHILA is a professional organization for health sciences librarians and information professionals in Africa. AHILA provides leadership in promoting access to and use of health information in Africa (4). With current membership of 250 professionals in 46 countries, AHILA seeks to be representative of French, English and Portuguese speaking countries on the continent, with each language group represented on the Executive Committee. The Association also has 15 country chapters and more than 45 global partners, including

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the European Association for Health Information and Libraries (EAHIL), US Medical Library Association (MLA), Section for Medicine and Health (SMH) of the Norwegian Library Association, World Health Organization (WHO), Information Training & Outreach Centre for Africa (ITOCA), Partnerships in Health Information (Phi), National Library of Medicine (NLM), HIFA.org, Elsevier Limited, Wolters Kluwer, Better Evidence, Mallory/Safari, among others.

Organization of the conference

One hundred and nine (109) professionals attended the conference, consisting of 72 Nigerians and 37 international delegates from 22 countries in Africa, two European countries, and the United States of America (USA). The theme of the conference, "Achieving healthy lives and well-being in Africa through access to and use of information", was selected to reflect the relevance of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) number 3: "Good Health and Well-being" and draw the attention of delegates to the health information practice gaps in Africa and what health librarians can do to promote the health and well-being of people on the continent. Four sub-themes were added to broaden the scope of discussion and encourage large participation (3), namely application of ICT to support medical education; quality of care and well-being-the contributions of health literacy to achieving health and well-being; education and training for health sciences librarianship in the 21st century: is the curriculum addressing the need? and reaching out to under-served communities to achieve health and well-being: contributions of health information professionals.

The conference had four components: training workshops; plenary sessions; paper presentations; and General Assembly. The workshops took place on the first day of the conference when facilitators delivered three parallel training sessions on systematic review, synchronous online teaching, and abstracts writing techniques. The workshops provided opportunity for delegates to acquire knowledge and skills related to each topic and network with colleagues during small group sessions.

The first plenary was the opening ceremony where the President of the Association, Dr Grace Ajuwon addressed the delegates and provided background information including the agenda of the conference.

This was followed by two keynote presentations titled "The role of librarians in achieving healthy lives" and "Use of information to generate health and wealth". The plenary sessions served as a forum where delegates learnt new information relevant to the themes of the conference and received announcements on the schedule for each day of the conference.

Thirty abstracts were presented during seven break-out sessions organized according to the sub-themes of the conference. The break-out sessions were grouped into two and held in parallel to give opportunity for many delegates to present their research and receive feedback from professionals working on similar projects. A moderator directed each session enabling the audience to engage presenters.

The General Assembly took place on the last day of the conference when new executives of the Association were elected. Delegates ratified the newly amended constitution and discussed three critical issues that emerged during plenary sessions. The issues are lack of curriculum for training of health sciences librarians in the African universities, the need to develop short training programmes in health sciences librarianship to upgrade the knowledge and skills of serving medical librarians since many of them learn on the job, and recommendation that health sciences librarians need to play leadership roles in conducting systematic reviews.

The achievements

We identified three key achievements from the conference. First, the conference had a good mix of local (67%) and international (33%) delegate participation. International delegates were drawn from English and French Speaking African countries, as well as representatives from EAHIL and MLA, attesting AHILA as an organization with global partnership. Although the majority of the delegates were medical librarians and health information specialists, health workers, academics and representatives of government agencies also attended the meeting, enriching the diversity of presentations and discussions.

Second, hosting the conference enabled members of the Local Organizing Committee (LOC) to acquire skills for planning, coordination, and team-work (3). Members of the LOC, many of whom had never participated in organizing a scientific meeting,

acquired skills which they can easily apply in their personal and professional lives. One of the unanticipated positive outcomes of the meeting was the creation of a WhatsApp group in which personal development topics were posted daily to improve the leadership skills of delegates.

Third, the conference agenda was balanced, integrating skills acquisition, information for career development, sources of evidence-based free e-resources (UpToDate), including databases from the WHO Afro Region, and books for libraries covering health-related topics like general medicine, nursing, public health, surgery, among others.

Challenges, lessons learnt

Despite the achievements, the organizers encountered some challenges in planning and hosting of the conference which had a large number of international delegates. Given the security crisis in Nigeria during the last 10 years, conference organizers knew that the safety of the international delegates was a top priority because foreigners are typical prime targets for terrorist's groups who kidnap and demand for ransom for the release of their captives (5). Thus, there was the challenge to raise N200, 000 ($600) needed to pay security personnel who were required to be on-site because security expenses were not included in the budget for the conference.

Arranging local flights from Abuja and Lagos to Ibadan for international delegates also posed a challenge. Ibadan has no international airport so international delegates flew into the country through Abuja and Lagos airports. The repairs on the Lagos-Ibadan highway created heavy traffic jam in October, which resulted in significant delays in travel time and stressful for travelers. To overcome this challenge, the conference organizers advised all international delegates arriving through Lagos to take the 20 minutes' flight from Lagos to Ibadan. Delegates arriving through Abuja were also advised to fly into Ibadan because of security concerns and the fact that road travel between these cities takes approximately 9 hours. Unfortunately, the international delegates could not make online booking for flights to Ibadan because local airlines accept online booking with only debit cards in Naira, the local currency. This problem reflects the lack of partnership between foreign and local airlines (6), a situation that limits air travel in

many African countries. The conference organizers paid airfares for the international delegates who later reimbursed them. The implications of these challenges are that organizers operating in settings like Nigeria may need to include funds for security in budget plans and international delegates should be required to pay equivalent of cost of local flights into a AHILA local chapter bank account.

As with planning and hosting any non-profit event, fund raising posed a major challenge for the LOC. Out of the 109 persons who attended the conference, 72% paid registration fees, 28% were exempted including members of the LOC, invited speakers and special guests. Thirty-three percent of those who paid the registration fees did so on-site. Yet the conference organizers had to pay for the venue, feeding, and bags, before delegates arrived. A few of the sponsors agreed to pay for specific events but the funds were received after the conference. This posed serious financial challenge for the LOC, who had to raise funds from personal savings. The implication is for organizers to start fund raising activities early, possibly between one and a half or two years prior to the commencement of the conference.

The Scientific Committee encountered a major challenge with submission and assessment of abstracts. Although guidelines for writing abstracts were provided in the conference announcements, many authors did not comply with the recommended format. For instance, some of the submitted abstracts exceeded the 250 words limit, others were unstructured, making it difficult to review them. The committee also did not envisage the extent of the variability in the type of abstracts submitted. For example, not all the abstracts were derived from research. Some of the abstracts were conceptual in nature, addressing themes like role of information in maternal mortality and digitization of hospital records. In order to overcome this challenge organizers of future conference should create a Redcap (www.project-REDcap.org) with approved format for different types of abstracts. This procedure makes review of abstract efficient both for members of the scientific committee and reviewers.

No-show, i.e. late cancellation by authors of abstracts scheduled for presentation at the conference, is a common phenomenon with scientific conferences (7). Twenty-nine percent of scheduled abstract

presentations were cancelled due to unplanned events such as doctoral (PhD) oral examination and funding constraints. However, the majority of those who cancelled never gave any reason for skipping the conference. The practice of submitting an abstract and cancelling participation without reasons raises questions about authors' motives for submitting an abstract for the conference. Some authors submit an abstract to have their names listed in conference proceedings to meet requirements for promotion. This behaviour is unacceptable for many reasons including the fact that it complicates the process of planning, it is a source of embarrassment to conference organizers, a cause of disappointment to delegates, and wastage of resources. For example, the name tags produced for authors who did not show up was a waste of resources.

Conclusion

Planning and hosting a scientific conference is an important community service to a professional association (3). The 2019 AHILA Conference created opportunity for health sciences professionals to network, learn, share new research and innovative projects aimed at meeting the health literacy needs of their clients. The hosting of the conference was successful but not without its challenges. Professionals who plan similar conferences will benefit from the experience of organizers of the AHILA conference described in this article.

Acknowledgements

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