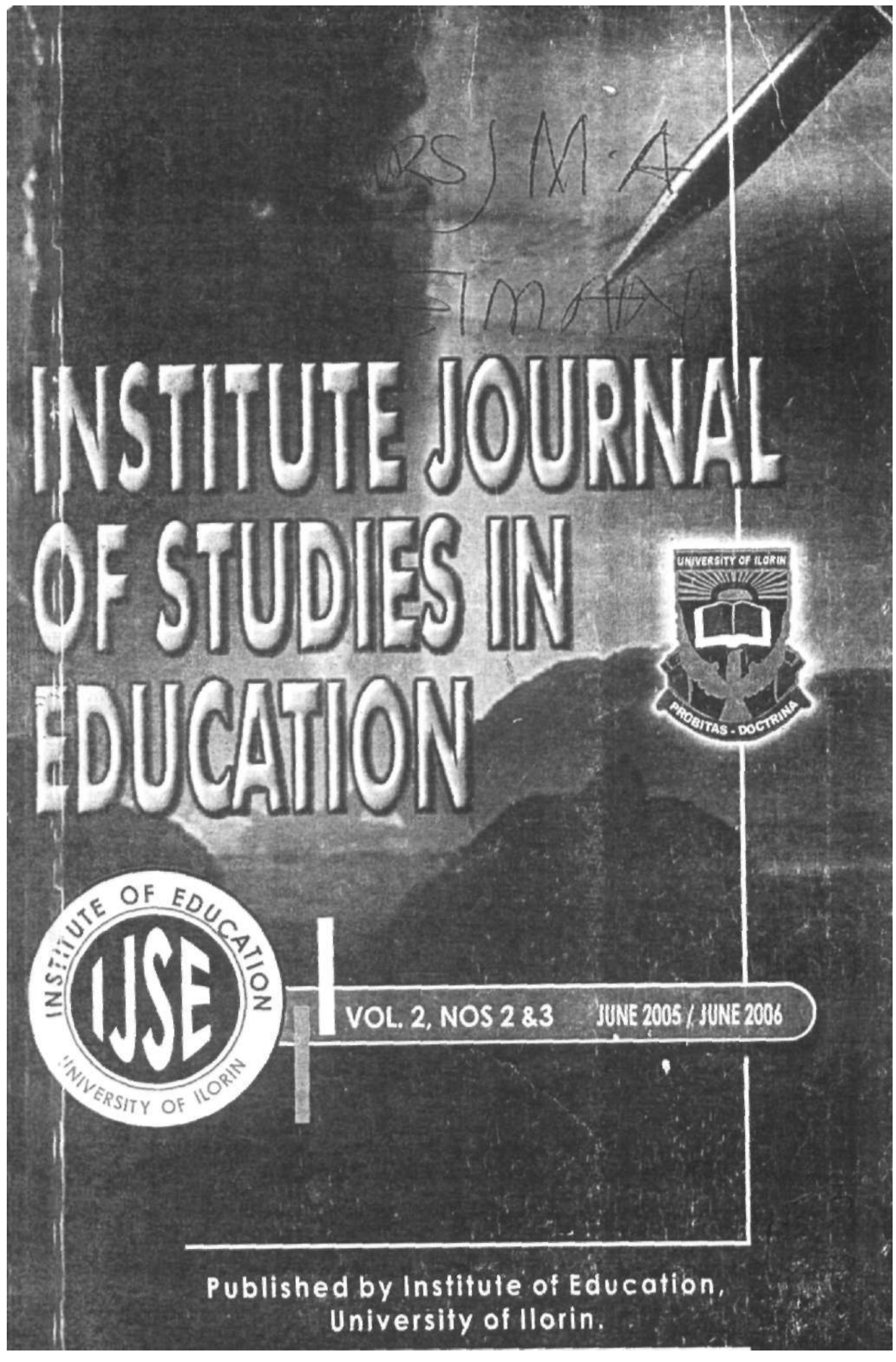

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A CRITIQUE OF WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION (WHO) DEFINITION OF HEALTH AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

BY

SHEHU RAHEEM ADARAMAJA, Ph.D

AND

SULEIMAN, M. F. (MRS), Ph.D

Abstract

A critique of the world Health Organisation (WHO) definition of health was done in this paper. The paper highlighted that the definition given by WHO in 1947 could not favourable be accepted in this millennium, especially with the development of various types of technological advancement, which in actual sense, cons tit ttes serious health problems to both individual and community health. The paper also examined factors that influenced both individual and community health; that make health to be "dynamic" rather than "a state of completeness", 'and that a complete state of health is better assumed or dreamt. Finally, a new definition of health 'hat will stand the test of our time in the 21 century was given.*

Introduction

The World Health Organisation (1947), defined health as a state of complete physical, mental, social and emotional well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The above definition sees or views health as a state. The state according to the New Oxford Dictionary means static, sometime that is not mov ng, or stationed and permanent. It is very unrealistic to see health in this millennium as a state. Health should be seen as a dynamic process or condition which is not static, which moves and liable to changes and fluctuations.

The definition also emphasized the word" complete", which meant to be a state of fullness, a state of being perfect, entire and wholesome. It is not practicable to see health in this perspective. It is better assumed or dreamt. It is even questionable if any individual throughout his life will be perfectly whole in all the aspects of life mentioned by WHO in terms of physical, mental, social and emotional being.

The unrealistic state of completeness as regard the human physical well being is a source of concern (Adeyemi, 1999). This is because, it is not when an individual has any deformity that we say he or she is not physically fit, but when he or she is not able to meet the rigors of life. He is also regarded as an incomplete person in terms of health and physique. Nwankwo (1997) stated that physical fitness fluctuates and may be maintained at optimum level by exercising regularly. Oyerinde (1992) observed that the need for all age groups to remain healthy and the preoccupation of these age groups with physical fitness and good health has led to a new zeal in adults and children to the value(s) of eating and exercising. This means that everybody is on the move and so our health status should move and static.

One can deduce from the arguments given so far, that health is not more a "state". It is also unrealistically attainable on a wholesome level. The mental and emotional status of individual should be complete with WHO's definition of health. The hours of sleep of every individual in addition with some factors in the

environment influence his mental and emotional health. Grout (1968) stated that children between ages 1 and 5 years require 11 -13 hours of sleep, 10 years require 10 -12 hours of sleep, 15 years require 9 -11 hours of sleep, 20 years and above requires 8 9 hours of sleep. The hours of sleep observed nowadays are not in line with the past requirements, because of modern electronics like television, video and audio cassettes and the tendency to become rich, through endless struggles under the name of business, especially in our urban cities. All these have since been keeping everybody awake or sleeping far into the night. The fact that WHO's definition of health was given in 1947, when one's state of complete mental and emotional well-being could be assessed or determined cannot favourably meet up with the challenges of the 21st century, especially with the discovery of modern technological devices.

The present goals of health call not only the alleviation of diseases or infirmity, it calls for even more than prevention of diseases. It also looks beyond to serve for maximum physical, mental and social efficiency for the individuals, his family and the community. It is noted that the health of the individual varies during any time span from optimum well being to low wellness. That is health fluctuates. Health is not merely a continuum of physical well being or of mental or social well being, but a continuum of all the three(3) dynamically interrelated and interdependent variables.

Who Perceived Health on the Negative Side:

Until recently, health was defined negatively as the absence of disease, as long as an individual was not sick (disable) he was thought to be healthy. Health is now coming into being an entity in its own, rather than view it as the absence of the more definable entity of disease. The World Health Organisation sees an individual as a whole or as an integrated until with each dimension of health having an influence upon the other dimensions. The psychosomatic aspect of health illustrated the dynamic interrelationship among the three(3) dimensions of health (physical, mental and social). An individual besets with social and emotional conflicts and pressure may develop ailment of physical nature such as high blood pressure or peptic ulcer (Forder & Dalis,1994).

With Health as a state of complete physical well being, it is fairly easy to define and understand. However, once health is moved into the realm of mental and social well being, its determinants are no longer as easily distinguishable or self cor tained. Viewing WHO's definition critically, health should not be seen as fixed status or level, but rather a direction in progress toward an every higher potential of functioning.

The WHO's definition of health is deficient, with reference to health as "state...: it is omitting the concept of variability or the fact that health rather than being static within an individual moves on a continuum of health i.e. from low level of wellness to optimal wellness, vice versa. The variability of health as stated above, support the point of view that there are gradation of health (Health can not be static, thus can not be "a state...") and that everyone not affected by diseases or disability may not be equally healthy. Health is not a condition, it is an adjustment . It is not static, but a process. It is through this process that human beings adjust to their environment.

Environment and Health of an individual

The health status of the individual becomes infinitely more complex as man is viewed in terms of his entire environment milieu. In an attempt to deal with the many facets of health illness continuum like culture, lifestyle patterns, genetics, physical environment and socio-economic status. We can view health as a process or a consequence of human behaviour rather than as a fixed attribute of an individual. It is the ability of an individual to interact effectively, physically, socially and psychologically with other individuals, groups and with the environment in which that individual and the society function.

If the health of the individual is determined to a great extent by the total environment in which he functions, then individual and community health are mutually dependent and one may not be assessed to the exclusion of the other. If health unlike manner is to be considered in its broadest sense, it must be considered within the framework of all the internal and external forces that affect man and his way of life.

The genetic make up of an individual imposes on him or her, characteristics and conditions that can never be altered. Whatever is inherited, will therefore influence the way a person looks, plays, interacts with others, etc and will affect his or her health status. All these will invariably affect the way health is perceived.

A healthy person in one cultural setting may not be perceived as being healthy in another. It is possible that a set of acceptable behaviours in a culture is termed abnormal in another. Ambition and goals differ from one individual to the other and from one community to the other. Health status and perceptions may be affected by the quest to attain certain goals whether realistic or unrealistic. When ambition and goals are not achieved, there sometimes develop a psychological and or social problem, which may lead to one kind of health problem or the other.

The effect of socio-economic status on individual and community health cannot be over estimated. The availability of adequate diet, good living conditions, good health care services, and so on, are very important in the attainment of optimal health. Since all these are influenced by socio-economic status, health status and perception will also be influenced by this factor.

Towards a New Definition of Health:

WHO's definition acknowledged the fact that health is more than non-disease (absence of disease or infirmity). The authors has criticized this definition proposing an ideal, rather than a measurable goal for which strategies for achievement can be devised. Health can be defined as the extent to which an individual or group on one hand, able to realized aspiration and satisfy needs and on the other hand to change or cope with the environment.

Health can simply be defined as a dynamic process of proper functioning of all the functional units which comprises the body systems such that they operate as harmonious whole, and can vary from one individual to another, depending on his or her genetic endowment and such environmental factors as culture, lifestyle-pattern (adequate rest, exercise and sleep), physical environment, social economic status and interaction with his or her immediate environment.

Health can also be defined as a process, in which all the systems of the body are well-coordinated, functioning with optimum efficiency in tune with the environment in which the organism lives- in this case, man. But if we wish to look at health in the abstract and consider it good health alone, we cannot but accept the World Health Organisation definition of health "as a state of complete physical,

mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHC 1947).

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