



ACE-PUTOR leads public enlightenment programme on Carbon Pollution (Black Soot)

Centre Leader's Welcome Address

Welcome Address by the Centre Leader to the Public Lecture and Stakeholders Interactive Forum on the Soot Epidemic in Rivers State

Protocol

I feel greatly honoured to stand here before such a distinguished gathering of renowned academics, key players in health and environment, members of the fourth estate of the realm, very distinguished ladies and gentlemen. As Leader of the Africa Centre of Excellence for Public Health and Toxicological Research, I am glad to welcome everyone first to the University of Port Harcourt and then to this public lecture and stakeholder's interactive forum on the soot epidemic in Rivers State. I am glad that a casual discussion on the soot a few days ago had instigated this gathering and I wish to tender the apologies of some of our strongest proponents and panelist such as Prof Nimi Briggs and Precious Ede who are unavoidably absent at this very moment and have secured our commitments to receive the resolutions following this meeting. We are not just here for an academic exercise but also as victims of this epidemic in the city of Port Harcourt and its environs. This had brought about the 'double air pollution burden'¹ with obvious negative impacts on all of us. The elementary knowledge reveals that the endemic and periodic epidemic of black soot results from a combination oil exploratory activity, meteorological changes, activities of artisanal crude oil refiners, poor environmental regulatory activities and the dearth of strategic knowledge resource to combat this preventable catastrophe.

PUTOR is a platform for providing inter-disciplinary and cutting-edge research projects that would help mitigate the public health issues arising from oil and gas exploration in the region. We hope to provide interdisciplinary solutions to the problem of this soot and other negative health impacts of oil and gas exploration and exploitation. Our ambitious plans also include the identification of all toxic chemicals in our environment, investigating their potential to cause harm and approach to mitigation. Working with stakeholders like you, we hope to generate a compendium of Toxic chemicals in 21st century in our setting like the US version of the **Tox21 Program** which has been an ongoing collaboration among her federal agencies to characterize

¹ Yakubu O. Particle (Soot) Pollution in Port Harcourt Rivers State, Nigeria—Double Air Pollution Burden? Understanding and Tackling Potential Environmental Public Health Impacts. *Environments*. 2018 Jan;5(1):2.

the potential toxicity of chemicals using cells and isolated molecular targets instead of laboratory animals. We surely cannot do this alone and so this stakeholders' interactive forum provides a unique opportunity to properly frame up this agenda and achieve stakeholders' commitment.

In this regard, we have invited some of the very best on the subject to this gathering. We believe that we can only see farther if we stand on the shoulders of giants like these ones.

PUTOR has a formidable team which includes the keynote speaker for today – He has authored over 250 publications; is the first Nigerian, European Registered Toxicologist (ERT) and the first African Fellow of Academy of Toxicological Sciences (ATS, USA). First African Speaker, Global Summit on Regulatory Science – Emerging Technologies for Food and Drug Safety (GSRS17), Brasilia, Brazil, 2017.

We appreciate all stakeholders who have come from far and wide to grace this auspicious event. You are very special to us and I hope you find this forum interesting and stimulating. Let me specifically appreciate my Vice Chancellor who has provided enormous support and encouragement to us. I extend my appreciation to the coordinator of the two WB Centres in UNIPORT, members of my management team, co-organisers of this event - UNIPORT School of Public Health, Faculty of Science and last but not the least the Organising team for this event.

Thanks once more for your presence as we hope to establish an enduring and mutually relationship with you.

Daprim S. Ogaji

Proceedings during the Event

A one-day Advocacy Forum on black soot was organised by the World Bank Africa Centre of Excellence in Public Health and Toxicological Research (ACE-PUTOR) declared on Wednesday, February 19, 2020 at the Ebitimi Banigo Auditorium of the University of Port Harcourt. The well-patronised public sensitisation programme was mounted in concert with the University of Port Harcourt School of Public Health (SPH) and the Faculty of Science.

Keynote speaker, Professor Ebere Orish spoke on the topic: “Link Between Environmental Air Pollution (Black Soot) and Non-Communicable Diseases: East Meets West.” Professor Orish, who is of the Department of Experimental Pharmacology and Toxicology in the University, called for Continuous Medical Education in sub-Saharan Africa to place more emphasis on Environmental Medicine that would address some of the preventable health complications that kill people, especially in the rural areas.

He decried the activities of those engaged in incomplete combustion, calling on regulatory agencies to be more proactive in combating the scourge of illegal refining, locally known as *kpofire*. Professor Orish also called for a review of the medical curriculum to incorporate Environmental Medicine that would equip Nigerian doctors to tackle health complications arising from the environment. “There is a need to revise the medical curriculum in Nigeria to include Environmental Medicine given the reality facing us in Africa with massive air pollution

and release of heavy metals that compromise the health status of our citizens,” Professor Orish said.

“Only 20 per cent of diseases that afflict humans are caused by gene inheritance, while the remaining 80 per cent is from the environment and yet doctors in Nigeria are not taught Environmental Medicine to equip them to address this glaring imbalance. If this trend continues, mortality rate will continue to increase, while life expectancy would continue to decrease in Nigeria,” he noted.

Professor Orish who is the first African Fellow of the Academy of Toxicological Sciences, said that anyone who lives in the soot-infested city of Port Harcourt in Nigeria, faces the same risk as heavy cigarette smokers. He further linked black soot to acid rain in the Niger Delta and rise in respiratory diseases and cancers. He also blamed black soot for increased menstrual disorders among young women of childbearing age in Rivers State. “Happily, several of the natural foods we eat will take care of the effects of black soot, which is also partly responsible for the prevalence of cardiovascular diseases,” he said.

Deputy Vice Chancellor (Administration), Professor Regina Ogali, who declared the event open on behalf of the University administration, commended ACE-PUTOR, SPH and Faculty of Science, and all the collaborating agencies for joining forces to organise the advocacy forum. “We are here to be enlightened on how to protect ourselves from the effects of black soot and other bad environmental practices that gradually undermine our health status. The experts have clearly established that many of the health complications that afflict us in this part of the country are traceable to black soot and other anthropogenic activities. It is unfortunate that people are dying every day from problems associated with our polluted environment, and we appear to be helpless. I am hopeful that at the end of this forum, we would learn to practise proper environmental stewardship to safeguard our lives,” Professor Ogali said.

Earlier, ACE-PUTOR Centre Leader, Dr Daprim Ogaji, told the gathering that the forum was organised to sensitise the University community and the general public on the adverse effects of black soot on human health. “We are not just here to engage in an academic exercise; we are also victims of this epidemic in the city of Port Harcourt and its environs, and we have a statutory mandate to lead public enlightenment programmes as a World Bank Centre of Excellence in Public Health and Toxicological Research. Elementary knowledge reveals that periodic epidemics associated with black soot results from a combination of oil exploratory activities, meteorological changes, artisanal crude refining, poor environmental regulatory measures and the dearth of strategic knowledge resource to combat this preventable catastrophe,” he said.

Also speaking, Deputy Director of the School of Public Health, Professor Charles Tobin-West, stressed the need for the issue of black soot to be taken very seriously in Rivers State because of its harmful effects on human health. “We already know that soot is harmful to our health. We have experienced an upsurge of soot in our environment, and it is important that we work

together to make our environment safe for human habitation. Public health is everybody's concern and we should play our own part in the battle against black soot and other environmental pollutants," he said.

On her part, Associate Dean of the Faculty of Science, Professor Eka Essien, who stood in for the Dean, Professor Ephraim Chukwuocha, noted that the Faculty of Science decided to join the Advocacy Forum to find serious solutions to soot in Port Harcourt and its environs, because of its harmful effects on humans.

The event featured a plenary session moderated by Visiting NUC LEAD Scholar, Professor Vincent Idemiyor and Mr Dayo Elusakin of *Nigeria Info 92.3 FM*. The immediate past Commissioner of Environment in Rivers State, Professor Roseline Konya, Chairman of the Rivers State House of Assembly Committee on Environment, Honourable Dumle Maol, Professor Precious Ede of Rivers State University and Public Affairs Advocate, Mr Eugene Abels, also gave diverse perspectives on the problems and health implications of black soot. Others who delivered goodwill messages included Coordinator of the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency, (NESREA), Mr Martins Ikechukwu, and his counterpart from the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), Mr Cyrus Nkangwung, who was represented by Dr Kenneth Aroh.

Members of the Organizing Committee

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| 1. Dr Kingsley Patrick-Iwuanyanwu | Chairman |
| 2. Dr (Mrs) Ojule | Member |
| 3. Dr Francis Anacletus | Member |
| 4. Mr Williams Wodi | Member |
| 5. Dr Anthonet Ezejiofor | Member |
| 6. Dr Faith Diorgu | Member |
| 7. Dr Catherine Ikewuchi | Member |
| 8. Mr Confidence Igwe | Secretary |

PUTOR wishes to express gratitude to the **University Management**, collaborating partners, other stakeholders and the **Steering Committee on Sexual Harassment** that organized these sensitization campaigns amongst the inhabitants of Rivers State.

We also wish to thank the **AAU** and the **World Bank** for their encouragement in the discharge of our statutory mandate in the advancement of public health and wellness in the West African sub-region and beyond.