Exploring Wellbeing Among People Affected by Skin Diseases in Liberia
Rachel Johnstone

Summary of Project
• Skin-related tropical diseases (skin NTDs) have significant psychosocial and physical impacts in Liberia.
• Qualitative methods were used to explore wellbeing, in order to develop psychosocial support for skin NTDs.
• Findings showed that intervention is needed in stigma reduction, psychological and financial support, and access to care.
• The study meets a knowledge gap in understanding community and person affected perspectives on NTDs in Liberia.

What are skin NTDs?
A group of infective skin conditions, found commonly in tropical climates, especially in areas of poverty. Leprosy is the most well-known.

Why is this research needed?
Previous research shows high burden of skin NTDs in Liberia, with significant associated psychological distress. Very little support is available.
REDRESS is a research programme working with the Liberian government to implement a holistic care package for skin NTDs.
My research provided a baseline and informed the REDRESS psychosocial intervention to ensure it meets the needs of affected people.

Data collection was undertaken by two REDRESS co-researchers and myself in Liberia in June 2022.

Methods
Qualitative research methods were used, including body-mapping and focus group discussion. The research used the naturalistic paradigm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Body-Mapping with Affected Persons</td>
<td>24 (4 groups, 2 male/2 female)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus Group Discussion with Community Members</td>
<td>25 (4 groups, 2 male/2 female)</td>
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Body-Mapping is a creative participatory method which brings a new perspective to NTD research.

Thematic analysis was done through NVivo 12.

RESULTS

The Affected Persons’ Perspective
High Psychosocial Burden: Most participants experienced low mood, anxiety and suicidal ideation.

Contributing Factors:
Many participants described stigma, poor access to care, and financial difficulties as negative influences on their wellbeing. Uncertainty due to the nature of disease and poverty, was also common.

Finding new purpose, faith and companionship had a positive influence on wellbeing.

The Community Members’ Perspective
Many community members had poor understanding of skin NTDs and inaccurate cultural beliefs. Information is often spread by word-of-mouth and sometimes gossip. Together these factors contribute to high levels of stigma.

The use of traditional medicine is common and must be considered in interventions for skin NTDs.

Conclusion
Stigma and misunderstanding of skin NTDs → social isolation and poor access to healthcare → delayed treatment → poor physical & psychosocial wellbeing.

Recommendations, based on participants’ responses: psychosocial support, stigma reduction, financial support, and improved medical care.

REDRESS interventions will support these priorities:
- Peer support groups
- Psychological first aid training
- Community health education and training
- Working alongside community health workers, traditional healers and local researchers

These strategies will allow sustainable improvement in psychosocial support for persons affected by skin NTDs in Liberia and other endemic areas.

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