The Enemy Within: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Persons with Autoimmune Conditions in Ghana

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Abstract

Autoimmune conditions including rheumatoid arthritis (RA), multiple sclerosis (MS) and systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) are chronic, life-altering conditions that significantly affect the lives of persons with the conditions. In Ghana, where awareness of these conditions is low, not much is known about how persons with the conditions experience, navigate and make sense of living with autoimmunity since much of the existing research on RA, MS and lupus is biomedically focused. This study explores the lived experiences of persons with RA, MS and lupus in Ghana, with a focus on how the conditions disrupt everyday life, shape identity and necessitate coping strategies. Drawing on Gadamerian phenomenology, the study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation with 26 participants primarily recruited from Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital through purposive sampling, which was supplemented with snowball sampling. Data analysis was guided by hermeneutic interpretation with the aid of concepts such as biographical disruption, loss of self, biographical reinforcement and biographical flow.

The findings reveal that, the lives of persons with RA, MS and lupus are disrupted in varying ways, which results in identity shifts and calls for the institution of various coping strategies. Findings also show that living with autoimmunity in Ghana is not just a biomedical concern but encompasses sociocultural, economic and religious dimensions that reshape individuals' sense of self and social worlds. While the study leans on biographical disruption and loss of self by demonstrating that the experiences of persons with autoimmune conditions in Ghana reflect elements of the concepts, findings indicate that patient experiences do not end at a disruption or a loss. Persons with autoimmune conditions in Ghana actively engage in reconstructing their

identity, faith and social belonging within local and cultural contexts. Policy recommendations including strengthening awareness and education about autoimmune conditions, expanding specialist training and ensuring financial coverage under the national health insurance scheme are made. The study also recommends future quantitative research with larger sample sizes to complement these qualitative insights. This study contributes to sociological understandings of chronic illness in Ghana and Africa by highlighting the voices of persons living with RA, MS and lupus, and underscores the need for a holistic response to autoimmunity in Ghana.