Fast-tracking healthcare digitalisation

Health systems have borne the brunt of Covid-19 globally, but the pandemic has also been a catalyst in the fast-tracking digitalisation in health and the development of vital tools, such as informatics.

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Described by Dr Raphael Akangbe as a new field that sits at the intersection of AI, big data, and healthcare, informatics is "vital tool for advancing Universal Health Care (UHC) within Africa's public healthcare systems".

Doctor, author and health informatics expert Akangke will address delegates at the Africa Health Congress in October on the topic *Telemedicine opportunities and challenges in Africa: policy and regulatory perspective*.

He says for health informatics to be used effectively, hardware and software systems must be in place, and the capacity of healthcare workers must be built on the protocols and processes involved.

"There are a lot of data-inputs needed for a sound healthcare informatics system, and the data-collection needs to be thorough and reliable," he says.

Telemedicine

With lockdown restrictions around the globe enforcing social distancing, telemedicine (or remote-access healthcare) rose in prominence almost overnight in some countries.

"The potential of telemedicine to bring quality healthcare, via satellite or cellular communication, to hard-to-reach remote locations is a promising prospect in rural Africa, where access to formal healthcare services may be limited or even non-existent," he says.

He adds that remote consultations with scarce specialists (who tend to be based within urban centres and academic institutions) could bring better quality care to more people, regardless of geographical distance, and in many cases could eliminate the need for costly long-distance travel in order to access facilities.

Other technologies have already seen limited use. "AI applications for healthcare, and IoT health devices have become more prevalent over the past two years. The recently launched Apple Watch Series 4, for example, contains electrodes which enable users to take an ECG directly from their wrists," he says.

Role of governments

Akangbe adds that in terms of governments' role in facilitating the digitisation of health on the continent, a full commitment to equitably distributing the resources and infrastructures that digitisation requires, with special attention given to the most isolated rural areas is of utmost importance.

"Lagos sits at the forefront of digital health in Africa and the Nigerian government has already begun to legislatively promote the use of health technology," he says.

Akangbe believes that investment into internet infrastructure with sufficient bandwidth is crucial for getting the population connected, as is investment into stable electricity supply, including solar projects where state utility supply is unreliable.

"Even the most sophisticated telemedicine systems won't help where there is no internet and electricity," he cautions.

"Covid-19 has opened our eyes to the need for digital healthcare. For now, we'd like to see African governments laying the foundations by facilitating access to enabling devices like phones and computers, as well as the infrastructure for reliable connectivity and stable electricity supply," he says.

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