

## ICTs in the Health Sector

By: John Yarney

Information management especially at the district level in Ghana's health delivery system remains thorny. John Yarney writes on how Ghana Ministry of Health has started an Information Management programme for personnel to improve with its data gathering and other initiatives to improve capacity within its health sector.

According to practitioners within Ghana health sector, data has been a major issue since Ghana started her health reforms.

For instance a survey conducted in the 90's found out that of the personnel in-charge of collating data at the district level were not trainable. They were mostly unskilled labor within that sector that had been pushed to perform data collection tasks. Aside that the human resource was poor, the turnover rate for those with the appropriate skills to perform those tasks was high.

Mr. Isaac Adams is the Director of Research, Statistics and Information at Ghana's Ministry of Health and outlines why data is critical to Ghana's health sector:

"we need information to review policies, make decision and to assess performance."

Again, accurate and on-time data help implementers and donors evaluate if they are getting a return on resources they are applying to any intervention.

Under the auspices of the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) a brainstorming roundtable conference, to think through how ICT can be used to support Ghana's health sector, penciled down an ICT training school for health sector as one of the priorities. The other issues included monitoring and evaluation, patient records system, surveillance and disease control and policy formation.

"We could not move without a policy, we had to work on an ICT policy as a matter of priority," said Adams of the outcome of the brainstorming conference.

The Ghana health authorities decided to start the health information's officers programme course at the Kintampo Rural health Training Institute, instead of the ICT School as recommended by the round table conference. The programme is designed to equip entrants with ICT and Information Management skills that would be relevant to the health sector.

"We knew that at the time of setting up, it would take us about 22 years to replace all people at the district level but had to start," recalls Adams.

It's been 5 years since the course was started and it has impacted significantly on Ghana's Health delivery system.

A survey to find the impact of graduates of the programme on the health sector found out that they are an important resource to the regional and district directors in the health service. Ghana's health sector is organized on the national, regional and district levels. The health director flag three qualities in the graduates of the programme -- they have the essential ICT skills, work without supervision and help with the critical area of organizing data.

Their demand in the health sector demonstrates their impact. According to Adams though they were trained to fill positions at the district level they have been hijacked at the national and regional levels of the health sector.

Though these practitioners have impacted Ghana's health sector there are still some issues. One major issue, is that they positions have not yet been formalized within the health sector.

Authorities in the health sector realize that ICT can support capacity development beyond data collection. The draft ICT policy for Ghana's Ministry of Health takes a two-pronged approach to build ICT skills to enhance their capacity to deliver to their clientele: the line of action includes training of the trainers; A small cadre of network managers and information officers at national and regional levels will be trained through short-term training courses provided by specialised ICT training institutes in Ghana and the trained cadre of information officers will train the end users that are to use/integrate the systems in their daily work.

According to framers of the policy the capacity building programmes will encompass: Information management for higher health administration staff, network manager and information officers; Network management and maintenance for network managers and information officers; Database and web development, management and maintenance for information officers; Information analysis and reporting for information officers; Data entry for support information staff and basic computer literacy for health staff (basic office programmes such as text, spread sheet and presentation programmes).

Another area in the health in which ICTs are being applied to improve capacity, is in Continuing Medical Education (CME).

A setback with the traditional training system is health practitioners have to leave the post to the venues where training is taking place to the detriment of their patients. The Ghana health Service categorizes the CME into the formal and non formal approaches. In the formal a training programme is planned for a certain locality, circulars sent to facilities in those localities and eligible staffs are nominated to take part in the training programme. With the non formal module newly employed staff are given the opportunity to understudy senior practitioners in certain procedures.

For 3 years the Ghana Health Service has been working on using ICTs to deliver training to health practitioners. They are considering the directed approach, where step by step training is put on CD ROMs, and other audio visual formats are provided to practitioners. Users can go through the step to step approach, answers questions, and their answers reviewed under different sections after each lesson.

Beyond data collection and CME health authorities want to employ ICTs to improve capacities in other aspects of the health delivery system. Ghana Health Ministry has 5 strategic objectives to meet its goals it has set. The objectives include increasing geographical and financial access to basic health services to all people living in Ghana; providing better quality of care in all health care facilities and all outreach centers; improving efficiency at all levels of the health care system; fostering closer collaboration and partnership between the public sector and communities, other sectors, non-governmental organizations, private healthcare providers and other interested groups and increasing the overall resources and ensure equitable and efficient distribution of resources in the health sector.

ICT is critical to develop and enhance capacity in all the 5 areas of the sectors strategic objectives. For instance in the area of increasing access managers of Ghana's health sector see ICT as critical to develop capacity to address the underlying problem of causes of access which include the inadequate service delivery points and a weak referral system, further complicated by the lack of appropriate transport system. Specialist support to the lower levels is also very limited due to the low numbers of specialists and the lack of facilities at the lower levels.

"Information and communication technology in this case will help in bringing the specialists skill to the lower levels while at the same time provide policy makers with a clearer understanding of the health problems of the lower levels for more precise planning and programming to be effected," states the draft ICT policy.

Similarly ICT is central to quality of service.

"Information and communication technology will need to be deployed in a way that skill transfer can be facilitated, service supervision and on line support can be enhanced and a system of rapid response to problems and health events even in very remote areas can be put in place," says drafter of the policy on how they think ICT will help build capacities in quality of service.

Adams reasons why ICTs are central to achieving all five objectives of Ghana's Ministry of Health; Ghana Ministry of health sees capacity development and enhancement in two ways improving the human capital and to create an environment for work to be done and ICTs are been incorporated to achieve that goal.

Finance to fund the ICTs in the sector remains the challenge to realizing its objectives.

"If equipment is not there, it makes nonsense of the policy," said Adams.

For further information contact the iConnect team: [editor@iconnect-online.org](mailto:editor@iconnect-online.org)

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