

Panelists push for e-health

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Article blurb With the advancement of technology, doctors are challenged to embrace e-health to deliver wellness services

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The use of ICTs in the management, monitoring and delivery of health services gained momentum as the GK3 drew to a close. E-health initiatives are envisaged to improve health care delivery and are also seen as mechanisms to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

During a workshop titled: Health Outcomes: 'The Role of ICT Applications, Standards and Practices', panelists explored the changing health landscapes and realities in developing countries about the growth, user challenges and solutions of ICTs in health care delivery.

Manager of the Biomedical Informatics Research Division, Medical Research Council of South Africa Chris Seebregts said e-health is an opportunity for routine health informatics and health care monitoring - referring to it as convergence between informatics and telemedicine. Seebregts talked about a successful e-health outcome in South Africa of monitoring HIV anti-retroviral treatment. The Biomedical Informatics Research Division, the South African Aids Vaccine Initiative and the centre for the AIDS programme of research in South Africa developed an HIV/AIDS medical and bioinformatics data management system.

He said they collected data from paper records using hand held-computers to implement a sustainable e-health information system. The data was integrated into an electronic patient recording system.

He also highlighted the importance of mobile phones for person-to-person clinic interactions and self-diagnosis in remote locations.

"We have a good experience in the use of mobile technology to interact with clinics and patients, counseling on HIV and assisting patients in self diagnosis in case they can't access a health centre. This is better than going to the health centre, sitting on a bench waiting the whole day for a doctor."

He singled out limited capacity and interconnectivity as challenges to developing e-health in developing countries. He noted that most places have no access to the Internet and the ability of people to use computers is limited. "We are fortunate in South Africa because we have an advanced cellular network. The cellular and wireless connectivity has impacted massively on the population but I am glad other African countries are learning from the South African experience."

President of Open Source Health Care Alliance Malaysia, Molly Cheah, argued that it is important for developing countries to set up immunisation data management systems. She said keeping electronic records could be used to monitor trends thus improving the health of children through vaccinations to reduce illness, disability, and death from vaccine preventable infections.

Cheah underscored the need for health practitioners to embrace e-health and called for its incorporation in the education curriculum.

"This is about readiness, what would be ideal is to prepare them when they are medical students, so they can have an electronic system in place. Those who have already graduated can learn on the job or receive specialized training otherwise some doctors are not comfortable using the technology available."

Cheah also raised the challenge of affordability of ICTs and the reluctance of some doctors to embrace telephone consultation because of payment issues.



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Pic: Angella Nabwowe