Training a Tech-Savvy Health Workforce

By Sam Wambugu, MPH, PMP

NAIROBI, Kenya—Digital technology is billed as an important catalyst in quickening the pace towards the achievement of universal healthcare in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where access to quality healthcare remains a pipe dream. Yet, to manage electronic health records, implement remote patient diagnosis and treatment, and manage digital data, health workers need a different set of skills.

For digital technology to be put to efficient use cutting costs, increasing patient safety, and improving overall management of health programs, human resource capacity at all levels is critical—both in skills and numbers.

It is with this realization that Kenyatta University in Kenya, in collaboration with MEASURE Evaluation—funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—and four other universities, hosted a week-long training program in July on appropriate application of information communication technologies (ICTs) to health programs. The program, tailored to meet the skills-gap challenge for LMICs, attracted participants from South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, and Switzerland.

The other universities in this collaboration were the University of Ghana, the University of Pretoria, Addis Continental Institute of Public Health, and the Public Health Foundation of India.

While opening the workshop, the Vice Chancellor of Kenyatta University, Professor Paul Wainaina, underscored the need to prioritize the enhancement of capacity for health professionals to cope with rapidly changing technology and emerging health needs.

Dr. Immaculate Kathure, representing USAID/Kenya at the opening ceremony, focused on the need to build bridges between the health and technology sectors. She noted that providing quality health in the digital era is a team effort, and implored participants not to lose sight of the chief goal for digital health—namely, to produce quality data and to use them to improve health services.

The main skills taught in this program were how to use technology to link patients in remote and underserved areas with well-resourced health specialists in other cities and countries, thereby providing better and affordable care otherwise unavailable. The program also emphasized the need to integrate currently separate health data

Vice Chancellor of Kenyatta University, Professor Paul Wainaina, opened the training session on appropriate application of information communication technologies to health programs. Photo by MEASURE Evaluation.

The July workshop built participants' skills to produce quality data and to use data to improve health services. Photo by MEASURE Evaluation.

Participants in the Nairobi workshop, co-facilitated by faculty from Kenyatta University and the USAID-supported MEASURE Evaluation project, learned about the use of digital technology for cutting costs, increasing patient safety, and improving overall management of health programs. Photo by MEASURE Evaluation.

management systems, a factor that limits access to comprehensive data needed to inform planning of health programs.

MEASURE Evaluation has collaboratively developed a range of digital health tools and guidelines tailored to the needs of LMICs. These resources are available online at no cost and as global public goods for interested institutions and health and ICT professionals.

The Nairobi training came hot on the heels of this year's resolution at the seventy-first World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva, Switzerland, where the member states unconditionally supported the advancement of global digital health. The WHA resolution is meant to spur action among the highest levels of government to implement digital health systems and thereby strengthen national health systems and help achieve major public health objectives.

To advance these goals, countries will need to update their health policies and strategies and offer guidance on how to mainstream ICTs at different levels of health provision. Healthcare professionals will need to be equipped to manage large amounts of data, as medical equipment and devices in hospitals collect and transmit them. As a long-term strategy, the curriculum in medical and

nursing schools will need to change in tandem, in order to produce ICT-savvy health professionals.

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Sam Wambugu is senior health informatics specialist, MEASURE Evaluation, ICF