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DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL AND SUSTAINABLE TELEMEDICINE/e HEALTH PROGRAM FOR NIGERIA.

ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED BEFORE STRATEGIC PLAN CAN BE MADE

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OUTLINE

- Introduction
- Policy-related
- Organization and Human capacities
- Financial
- Technical
- Health Technology Assessment
- Next Steps

Introduction

- This paper is based on research, development and literature studies over the last decade.
- The aim is to give an overview of the most important issues to consider when developing a telemedicine and e-health program for Nigeria.
- Those seeking to introduce telemedicine into an organization, community, geo-political zones in Nigeria will need to address issues like; Policy-related, organizational, financial, technical and Health technology assessment.
- It is important because clinical requirements and the technology being considered for adoption must specify with a clear outline of the application and equipment, staff and other resources.

Policy-related Issues

- Planners, administrators and health professionals in Nigeria will need a working description of the technique and how it is interacting with the services which they are responsible for.
- Consequent effects of implementing telemedicine in Nigeria, often specific to individual health-care programs and institutions.
- Implementing telemedicine in Nigeria will require multidisciplinary collaboration, with the active participation of information and communication technology /health care professionals. There is need to breach the gap between the two communities at all levels.
- National ministries of health, science&technology and communications need to work together towards forming a NATIONAL COMMITTEE with a multidisciplinary composition to introduce a telemedicine /e health policy, legislation, strategy for Nigeria and achievement of universal service where emergency, health and social information systems are involved.
- This will assist with awareness raising at a National level with the existence of a National association already (SFTeHIN).

Policy-related issues

- A few questions to be considered:
 - What are the main challenges in the Nigeria's health care system?
 - Which of these could be successfully addressed by telemedicine/e health?
 - What are the current or planned health care programs/activities in Nigeria that could benefit from the application of telemedicine/e health?
 - Have any strategies or policies for implementing telemedicine/e health been developed in Nigeria previously?
 - Have there been any projects or systems using telemedicine/e health in Nigeria previously? If so, what is the experience?

Organization/Human capacities

Issues

- There are several challenges related to organizational issues which have to do with commitment and ownership of the project or service.
- Some challenges have to do with the inevitable changes of work patterns and procedures and professional resistance to changes in a profession characterized by hierarchy and clearly demarcated roles.
- At this early phase the question of available key personnel and National committee on telemedicine/e health in Nigeria should be discussed.
- A few questions to be considered:
 - Which are the geographical areas, local institutions or focal points that would be involved in a telemedicine project or service in Nigeria?
 - Why would these areas or institutions be recommended?
 - What kind of human resources are available?
 - What is the computer literacy level among key personnel?
 - What kind of training programs will be needed?

Organization/Human capacities Issues

- How is the issue of medical responsibility within the Nigeria's health care system in relation to health telematics?
- Is there any existing legislation in Nigeria on confidentiality, security, and privacy which could apply for telemedicine/e health?
- In case of provision of services between countries, is a special license for health care personnel required? If not, will this cause any problems for the introduction of telemedicine and e health in Nigeria.?

Financial Issues

- The question of sustainability should be considered at this early phase for all proposed projects on telemedicine/e health in Nigeria.
- The cost should be divided into investment and ongoing costs including plans for long term funding.
- A few questions to be considered:
 - How will the project or service be funded with regard to investments and running costs?
 - How will the service be paid for, e.g. reimbursement, out of pocket, tax?
 - What is the level of communication cost in Nigeria?
 - Who will provide training and maintenance?
 - What kind of activities, human resources, equipment and other factors can be provided by the local project participants or government?

Technical Issues

- Technical issues include a complexity and variety of objectives, functions as well as the content of applications.
- The technology chosen should be dependent on the outcome of the user's requirement analysis and actual status in Nigeria in terms of information communications technology infrastructure.
- Standardization should also be considered.
- A few questions to be considered:
 - How is the telecommunication infrastructure in Nigeria , in terms of distribution and costs?
 - What type of communication technology is used, ground based or satellite?
 - Is the infrastructure reliable?

Technical Issues

- Are there any government plans for the current telecom infrastructure in Nigeria?
- Which are the main telecom providers in Nigeria?
- Which are the internet service providers in Nigeria?
- Are there any key aspects that should be known, like power supply, difficult geography in Nigeria?
- How is the distribution of technical equipments like computers, digitized medical equipment, in hospitals, GP offices and administrative units in Nigeria?
- How will maintenance be cared for?
- In case of local equipment vendors, are they likely to provide training?

Health Technology Assessment

- Health technology assessment (HTA) is been suggested as a basis for the appraisal of telemedicine applications by those seeking to introduce the technique to routine practices in Nigeria.
- HTA considers the effectiveness, appropriateness and cost of technologies by answering the four fundamental questions: a. Does the technology work? b. For whom in Nigeria? C. At what cost in Nigeria? d. How does it compare with alternatives in Nigeria?

Next Steps

- After discussing the issues on the implementation of telemedicine/e health in Nigeria, the next steps are to be taken by the National committee.
- The National committee should consider the following points:
 - Propose a framework for rational development and deployment of national, or organizational capacity for telemedicine systems in Nigeria.
 - Establish core principles to ensure coordinated, cost effective and integrated approach to telemedicine in Nigeria.
 - Consider ways to assess effectiveness, efficiency, and whether or not telemedicine is improving equality in the access to health services for all Nigerian citizens.
 - Recommend a long term process for addressing issues as they emerge with changing technologies and patterns of health care practice in Nigeria.

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