DIGITAL HEALTH IN FOCUS

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EDITORIAL

Harnessing the Power of Digital Technology for Health Workforce Development

By Tadesse Alemu

A well-functioning health system demands a competent and motivated health workforce to help countries reach their goals of universal health coverage. However, countries, especially low- and middle-income countries, face varying degrees of difficulty in training, deploying, motivating and retaining a competent health workforce. The ever-growing demand for health services and the intricate nature of health issues and limited resources further deepen these issues. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach. It necessitates innovations and new technology.

Digital technology has led to the emergence of eLearning platforms, such as online learning, virtual simulations, and mobile learning applications. Online training programs and webinars allow health workers to remotely access training and educational resources, breaking geographical and related cost barriers. They cost-effectively promote the exchange of knowledge, skills, and best practices to a larger number of individuals, while enabling personalized self-paced learning. eLearning fosters a culture of continuous skill and professional development, ensuring that health workers are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to provide high-quality health services.

Digital technology can be applied to both during preservice and inservice training of the health human resources. Universities are now leveraging the power of digital technologies to deliver courses and other reference materials online. Students can access course content and engage with instructors and peers online. This saves physical space, cost, time and the learning experience of trainees. It also creates an opportunity to gain digital literacy skills that are valuable in today's technology-driven world.

Digital technology also modernizes human resource management in healthcare organizations, enabling better recruitment and performance evaluation. It also helps provide training contributing to continuous professional development (CPD), enabling health workers to secure updated skills for license renewals All of this creates a more skilled, engaged and motivated workforce that is better prepared to meet the evolving health service needs.

USAID's Digital Health Activity has been providing technical and material support to 22 health science colleges across Ethiopia to provide online and blended (combined virtual and classroom based) learning opportunities to strengthen the capacity of frontline health workers. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH), a digital system was set up to help provide online learning opportunities to health workers in the country. So far, six courses have emerged. These include: DHIS2, health management information systems (HMIS) core concepts, electronic community health information systems (eCHIS), Dagu, IPLS and Ethiopian Primary health care guideline (EPHCG) training. A total of 6,325 number of individuals have registered for these various courses and 2401 of them completed. Around 23.4% of the trainees were women.

Though this represents significant progress in ensuring the highest quality of care for Ethiopians, there are a number of infrastructure issues limiting gains. The inaccessibility of online learning platforms due to a lack of computers and reliable connectivity, is a major bottleneck. Poor digital literacy and skills among health workers also significantly contributes to the problem. Maximizing the potential of digital technology for health workforce development requires careful planning and investment to address these challenges.

JSI's USAID-funded Digital Health Activity Secures New Leadership

Photo: Naod Wendrad, the new DHA's COP

The Digital Health Activity (DHA), a six-year contract with USAID that supports Ethiopia's Ministry of Health in carrying out an *Information Revolution, announced* a new Chief-of-Party. DHA, a massive project undertaking the work of digitizing Ethiopia's health sector, has tapped Naod Wendrad to lead the project.

Naod has over 15 years of experience in the Ethiopian health sector, in particular within the Health Information System. Naod has spearheaded the overhaul of national health sector strategic plans, facilitated revisions in health policy, coordinated comprehensive national health sector planning, and led the successful implementation of HIS strategy and digital blueprint architecture, transforming healthcare data management and accessibility. Through this experience, he has worked closely with the DHA.

Naod holds a Master of Hospital and Health Care Administration from Mekelle University and a Bachelor of Science degree from Hawassa University. His scholarly contributions include authoring several publications in esteemed peer-reviewed journals, focusing on data quality improvement, digital health, COVID-19 case management, and the pandemic's impact on healthcare service utilization.

The Activity is looking forward to Naod's multifaceted leadership and ongoing contributions to transformative health initiatives in Ethiopia, particularly in advancing the Health Information System and digital health.

MAJOR ACTIVITIES FROM THE QUARTER

Empowering Healthcare Providers: Online Training Initiatives Enhance Quality Primary Healthcare Services

In January and March 2024, 430 healthcare providers that attended online training on the Ethiopian Primary Health Care Clinical Guideline (EPHCG) completed the training and received certificates. The trainees were drawn from 11 health centers. The certification will help trainees accrue continuous education units (CEUs), scores given for attaining milestones in professional development, which will help them during renewal of professional licenses.

The online facilitated EPHCG was introduced to all healthcare workers by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with USAID's DHA. The integration of EPHCG into the MOH's continuous professional development training curriculum reflects a commitment to improving the quality of healthcare services. This effort demonstrates the role digital health plays in health human resource development.

The successful completion of the EPHCG eLearning module by health care workers underscores the effectiveness of remote learning in equipping individuals with the necessary skills to provide quality primary healthcare services.

> **The online training offers several benefits for healthcare providers as it allows them to access educational resources from anywhere with an internet connection. For women who are often balancing their educational pursuit with work and caregiving roles often falling to them. It offers flexibility in scheduling, while enabling them to level-up in their professions.**

Dr. Meti Amsalu, Medical Director at Nifas Silk Lafto Woreda 12 Health Center.

DHA Staff Joins Digital Health Forum to Discuss Scaling Up Digital Health Solutions in Ethiopia

In a recent panel discussion titled 'Scaling Up Digital Health Solutions: Balancing Expansion and Sustainability', experts from various sectors convened to explore strategies aimed at expanding digital health tools in Ethiopia while ensuring long-term sustainability.

Hosted on March 8, 2024, the panel featured representatives from diverse backgrounds including the MOH, USAID, University of Gondar, a private tech Company known as Orbit, as well as experts from DHA. The event served as a platform to delve into critical issues surrounding the scalability and sustainability of digital health initiatives in Ethiopia.

Key topics discussed during the forum included aligning resources effectively to amplify impact of digital health projects nationwide. The panelists exchanged insights and offered recommendations tailored to policymakers, health care providers, researchers, and innovators within the digital health space. Attendees gained valuable insights into ongoing initiatives spearheaded by the MOH, various donors, health care facilities, implementing partners, and representatives from the private sector.

The discussion underscored the importance of collaborative efforts in driving digital health scale-up initiatives forward, emphasizing the need for coherence and coordination among stakeholders to maximize impact and ensure sustainability in the long run.

USAID and Ministry of Health Officials Paid a visit at a Medical Equipment Maintenance Help Desk

During a recent visit to the innovation lab at St. Peter Specialized Hospital, Her Excellency Frehiwot Abebe, State Minister of Health, alongside representatives from USAID and other key stakeholders, evaluated the functionality of the newly established medical equipment maintenance help desk call center. The visit aimed at gauging the effectiveness of the Medical Equipment Management Information System (MEMiS) in managing medical equipment inventory and workflow, while also addressing concerns surrounding sustainability and resource allocation.

The visit was attended by officials from USAID, Pharmaceutical and Medical Devices Lead Executive Office, DHA, and St. Peter Specialized Hospital's management team and provided an opportunity to closely examine the operations of the call center and the innovation lab. Her Excellency Frehiwot Abebe toured various sections of the facility, observing firsthand how MEMiS is being utilized for medical equipment management and maintenance. Additionally, representatives from DHA demonstrated the workflow of the medical equipment remote help desk, showcasing its functionality and impact.

Throughout the discussion, participants raised concerns regarding the sustainability of having biomedical engineers serve as helpdesk agents for ongoing remote support. Her Excellency Frehiwot Abebe expressed appreciation for the progress made thus far while emphasizing the need for ongoing support to sustain the medical equipment remote help desk center and to address future challenges.

USAID Deputy Administrator Visits Impactful Tech Initiatives at Ferensay Health Center

Paloma Adams Allen, Deputy Administrator for Management and Resources at USAID, recently visited Ferensay Health Center to observe the

transformative work of youth enterprises supported by USAID's DHA in the realm of digital health.

During her visit, Deputy Administrator Paloma Adams Allen engaged with representatives from seven Youth Enterprises supported by DHA, which play a crucial role in implementing digital health interventions across hospitals and health centers in their respective areas. The visit provided insight into how USAID, through the DHA, facilitates employment opportunities for recently graduated youth within the digital sector.

Throughout the interaction, youth enterprise representatives showcased their support activities, highlighting the pivotal role of USAID in fostering job creation for youth in technology while addressing digital health-related workforce challenges in the health sector. Furthermore, the visit emphasized the collaborative efforts between donors, the MOH and health sector partners in designing and executing youth-focused interventions aimed at driving progress in health care delivery.

Deputy Administrator Paloma Adams Allen also empathized with the challenges faced by youth enterprises in Ethiopia, recognizing the role of USAID-Ethiopia in mitigating these obstacles within the health sector. The visit underscored the importance of building sustainable digital health ecosystems, while empowering youth to contribute meaningfully to those systems to ensure sustainability of the gains.

A Sensitization Workshop on Wellness Pass Card

The MOH has embarked on a transformative journey towards a healthier and digitally empowered future by introducing the Wellness Pass card. This revolutionary initiative aims to streamline vaccination monitoring and extend its utilization, marking a significant leap forward in health care innovation.

A recent two-day workshop held in Addis Ababa brought together key stakeholders, including the State Minister of Health, Dr. Ayele Teshome, to chart the course for this digital health initiative. The workshop, held on January 16th and 17th, 2024,

served as a pivotal step in promoting the adoption of digital health technologies to fortify the health care system.

The implementation of the Wellness Pass is poised to revolutionize health care delivery by facilitating capture and monitoring of vaccination information for routine immunizations and COVID-19, while enabling patient control of their own immunization data. Plans are underway to extend the application of this technology to other potential use cases, promising a comprehensive approach to healthcare management.

With a focus on continuity of care and expanding access to vaccinations, the MOH is committed to ensuring the success of this application.

DHIS2 recovery effort in Tigray Region

Post-conflict recovery of routine health data reporting systems is very important both for the region and the country. A national task force that includes USAID and all implementing partners was established months prior to ensure this restoration, which requires material, technical and capacity strengthening activities.

Capacity strengthening was taken care of by DHA over the last several months. DHA has done this by engaging regional health bureaus woreda and health facility staff. But the major challenge in the process of recovering DHIS2 in Tigray is lack of the required materials. During the national task force meeting DHA was given the mandate of coordinating and collecting the required materials plagued by each of the fifteen implementing partners supporting the region. In response, DHA has collected 71 desktop computers, 6 UPS, 5 dongles and printers. The materials were checked and transported to the Tigray regional health bureau. The computers were configured at regional health bureau level before distributing it to the targeted high-volume health centers of the region. Out of the collected desktop computers, three were distributed to woredas in Mekelle town to recover their DHIS2 system

USAID Visit to Tigray

On March 12, a delegation from USAID Ethiopia's Health Office, led by Jonathan Ross, the Health Director, along with representatives from USAID-funded implementing partners, conducted a site visit to Kedamay Woyane Woreda and Mekelle Center in Mekelle, Tigray Region. The purpose of this visit was to observe the first woreda where post-conflict DHIS2 implementation is underway, with support from USAID.

During the visit, the team also briefly visited Mekelle Health Center, where Dagu2 was deployed and operational. The DHIS2 visit aimed to present the restoration plan and objectives and gather valuable feedback from delegates, drawing on their rich experiences in the area and other projects, to further expand the platform in the region.

During the visit it was noted that three months' worth of data for the woreda has been recorded in the system already. The woreda HMIS office showcased the benefits derived from the digital system by presenting the data in different presentation formats and visualization mechanisms, expressing a desire for its deployment in all health centers reporting to the woreda to streamline data entry and enable a focus on data quality assessments and overall service quality improvements.

Additionally, the team visited Mekelle Health Center, where Dagu 2.0 was recovered and utilized for pharmaceutical transactions management. Saba, the pharmacist in charge, provided insights into the system's functionality and raised questions regarding connectivity and uninterruptible power supply (UPS), among others, to enhance its effectiveness.

Following the visit, the team held brief discussions with the woreda health office head and pharmacy focal person. Members of the team expressed satisfaction in seeing the investment in DHIS2 and Dagu being utilized as intended and the functioning of both tools. They emphasized the importance of expanding this experience to other woredas and facilities to achieve 100% DHIS2 coverage in all accessible areas. The woreda raised several support requests, including the renovation of their old health center, provision of computers for all 18 health office staff, vehicles for transportation of drugs and supplies from EPSS hub, and funds for HMIS and other training initiatives.

Finally, the team provided feedback and reflections, commending the huge efforts in DHIS2 restoration activities and gadget donations by all partners, with hopes to witness data flow into the DHIS2 system in the coming months.

Study Reveals Barriers and Facilitators of eCHIS Use in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, eCHIS is being widely implemented to support the quality and work of community health workers. A recent study identified obstacles and factors that can enhance the utilization of eCHIS, particularly focusing on health extension workers (HEWs) in various regions of Ethiopia.

The study spanned regions including Amhara, Harari, Oromia, Sidama, South West Ethiopia, and Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Regions. Data collection occurred from May 15 to May 29, 2022, through face-to-face in-depth interviews. A total of 54 interviews were conducted with HEWs, their supervisors, health information technicians, and managers.

Key Findings:

The study revealed several barriers impeding the effective utilization of eCHIS:

1. Lack of infrastructure and resources such as tablets, power banks, SIM cards, and reliable power supply and connectivity
2. Poor quality of training, follow-up, and supervision.
3. Parallel recording using both manual and electronic systems due to a phase-based deployment of eCHIS modules and,
4. Heavy workload for HEWs.

On the other hand, facilitators contributing to the uptake of eCHIS were identified:

1. Data quality, retrievability, and traceability.
2. Tablet portability.
3. Encouragement from supervisors and,
4. Positive community perception resulting from HEWs' use of tablets.

The findings underscore the critical need for an integrated and coordinated approach to eCHIS implementation in Ethiopia. Addressing identified barriers and reinforcing facilitators are paramount to enhancing the effective utilization of eCHIS, ultimately improving community health outcomes.

Read the full study here ☞ https://bit.ly/49dfWpq

DHA Commemorates International Women's Day with Dedication to Healthcare Empowerment

In honor of International Women's Day, DHA embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at recognizing and empowering women in the health sector, particularly within the digital health and health information system spaces. This year's celebrations were marked by enthusiasm and a deep commitment to foster positive changes within the health care landscape.

One of the highlights was a small coffee ceremony held at the DHA office, serving as a symbol of unity and appreciation for the contributions of women in health care. During this gathering, DHA took the opportunity to recognize the achievements of a women health specialist who had completed online training through the DHA-supported eLearning platform. Their dedication and commitment to improving health care in Ethiopia were acknowledged with certificates of appreciation, underscoring the importance of continuous learning and professional development.

In addition to the coffee ceremony, DHA launched a dynamic social media campaign throughout the week, engaging both DHA staff and health professionals.

This campaign provided a platform to share meaningful messages and highlight the tangible impacts of DHA's initiatives in the healthcare sector.

SUCCESS STORY

The Story of Our Women Champions: Medhin Abrha Teka and Eleni Gebru

By Eyob Kebede

In the face of adversity, two extraordinary individuals emerged as shining examples of resilience and dedication, crafting a story of triumph amidst hardship.

Medhin Abrha Teka, stationed at Haikmeshal Health Center in the Agula district, demonstrated remarkable determination amidst the challenges of wartime conditions. Despite the odds, Medhin cleverly safeguarded the DHIS2 computer, ensuring its protection from potential damage or loss. Her unwavering commitment extended to careful data collection and entry into DHIS2, spanning for two years, all while enduring the hardships and facing the absence of salary and guidance.

Reflecting on her actions, Medhin shared, "It might be helpful for analysis if I collected and saved [data] in the computer. All staff were working in this condition, so why not me? I might be requested by any organization for data during the conflict time and may use it for some meaningful purpose for our people, so I contributed."

Similarly, Eleni Gebru, serving as an HMIS officer at the Adwa district health office, persevered through conflict-ridden areas with unwavering resolve. Despite the adversities of war zones, Eleni adeptly safeguarded computers and ensured uninterrupted data entry into DHIS 2 software for two years. Her dedication to maintaining data integrity across numerous health facilities within the district significantly bolstered the district's data management capabilities.

Photo: Eleni Gebru, Adwa District Health, Health Management Information system Officer

Eleni emphasized the importance of their work, stating, "All staff of the health facilities were working too hard during this time to save lives of the people, so I should work to collect the data and enter it into the system for further use. If I have to collect the data, instead of collecting using paper and exposing it to other damage, better to use the system and I do have a moral obligation to collect data in this devastating conflict."

The unwavering commitment and exemplary performance demonstrated by Medhin and Eleni are evidence of their professionalism and dedication to their roles. Their contributions not only fortified our health information management systems but also served as an inspiration to us all.

Embracing New Technologies: A Senior Leader's Journey to Efficiency and Empowerment

In the bustling halls of Ferensay Health Center, change was on the horizon. Kebebush Abera, a seasoned cashier at 56 years old, stood at the forefront of this transformation. For over nine years, she had dedicated herself to serving the community in the health center. Yet, it was the advent of new technologies that would redefine her role and elevate her impact.

> **As an experienced staff member at the health center, I am delighted to serve the community more effectively through the use of new technologies in the health system,**

Kebebush shared, her voice filled with optimism and determination. It was a sentiment echoed by many, as the implementation of Electronic Medical Records (EMR) brought a wave of change throughout the center.

For Kebebush, the transition to digital platforms marked a personal milestone. Having spent her career navigating paper-based processes, embracing a computer in her late 50s was no small feat. "Thanks to my supervisors for their proper mentorship and support, I am now able to use these new technologies after a lifetime of paper-based work experience," she reflected gratefully.

Her journey with EMR began as the system permeated every corner of the health center. From the recording room to the laboratory, the once manual processes now thrived in the digital realm. As the final stop in the payment process, Kebebush's role as a cashier is important in executing transactions seamlessly.

"People also gave me positive feedback," Kebebush shared with a smile. Before the system, the center grappled with inefficiencies and delays due to fragmented information. However, with EMR, the once arduous task of retrieving patient data became instantaneous, saving time for both the staff and clients alike.

It wasn't just about adapting to new tools; it was about embracing a new way of thinking. "My supervisors supported me in using the system and learning from the younger society. EMR creates my first ever experience using a computer" Kebebush affirmed. In turn, she became a beacon of knowledge, sharing her experience with colleagues and fostering a culture of continuous learning.

Today, Kebebush stands as a testament to the power of resilience and adaptability. Her journey from paper to pixels not only streamlined processes but also empowered her to make a lasting impact on the community she serves. As Ferensay Health Center continues to evolve, Kebebush's story serves as a reminder that with the right support and mindset, anyone can thrive in the face of change.

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