GINKS ICT and Health Seminar

Report on an Overview of eHealth Projects in Ghana

Mrs. Baaba Da-Costa Vroom of the School of Public Health, University of Ghana chaired the Seminar. In her opening speech, she welcomed participants who are made of Students and the general public to the educative seminar and urged them to take the topic serious to learn and share about the current situation surrounding the eHealth projects in Ghana.

The resource person Mr E. Afari-Kumah (lecturer at the University of Ghana) who is also conducting a research into the state of eHealth projects in Ghana said eHealth is the right way for Ghana's Health System. Beginning the presentation, he asked participants to do self introduction.

He said Technology is rapidly advancing and Ghana must embrace the opportunities it brings especially in the area of health care delivery from the urban through to the grassroots level.

According to him, health problems in developing countries especially Ghana is enormous but technology helping remedy some of the health impediments. He outlined several factors resulting in this set backs namely, inadequate infrastructure and capacity building training for health workers and these contributes to poor health care delivery systems in Ghana.

He cited an example of a group of people from USA who carried out research in Ghana in Health and found out that the number of doctor to patient ratio in USA is very low as compared to Ghana.

What then is eHealth?

Defining eHealth, Mr Afari said the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines eHealth as: the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in health.

He further stated that in July 2010, the Government of Ghana launched the national e-health strategy into the country.

The key strategies under the eHealth strategy are:

1. Streamlining the regulatory framework for health data and information management

2. Building sector capacity for wider applications to provide eHealth solutions in the health sector.

3. Increasing access and bridging equity gap in the health sector through the use Information Communication Technology, and towards paperless records and reporting systems.

Mr Afari said for Ghana to experience any successful implementation of eHealth projects, the right policies, strategies etc must be in place. He reinstate that it is only in 2009 that Ghana became aware of the usefulness of Telemedicine in health care delivery mean while other countries have embraced it widely as far back in the 60s.

He said it is important that public health workers get more education in the health sector and be able to educate others on health related issues.

Talking about Tele-conferencing, Distance learning, Tele-education can serve as a means of advancing in knowledge on health. He added that it should be possible for doctors, nurses and other health workers living in rural areas to undertake post-doctoral courses online and graduate. He said eHealth has an important role to play in our part of the world as developing nations.

"When one wants to deployed ICT in Health, we must lobby the society, Government, NGO's in Health etc. We should target the people in the community (stakeholders) and talk to them about the idea. Health workers must be prepared to pilot other existing projects instead of starting new ones; we must develop the ability of monitoring progress of existing eHealth projects". Afari

Why Does Ghana need eHealth?

He stressed that Ghana needs eHealth in order to provide access to effectively distribute health knowledge and information to most rural health workers in the country.

He stated that currently people living in rural areas are using all sort of sophisticated phones which prepare a good ground for eHealth applications as most eHealth applications run on mobile phones.

"eHealth have the potential to reduce cost of medication to patients and also save life and Ghana must embrace it" Afari

He mentioned MoTECH, saying it is one of the current eHealth projects being run by the Ghana Health Service through the use of mobile phone. He further explained that the MoTeCH initiative is a viable mobile phone-based health education project for pregnant women.

He explained further that the system is designed to tell women what to expect during pregnancy, dispel myths and cultural practices, and provide general health information. He added that MoTECH also helps community health workers to record and track the care delivered to women and newborns in their area. Each rural health facility is equipped with low-end mobile phones on which the MoTECH Java application for health workers is installed.

Challenges

He said Ghana has encountered many challenges so far as e-Health is concern. He added that Ghana has developed a draft eHealth policy document to guide the implementation of eHealth projects and activities but not in use as it is still in the draft state. He urged Ghana to learn from Malaysia, which have Tele-medicine policy in place for use by health professional and that Ghana must learn some useful lessons.

He however stressed that despite the numerous benefit derived from the use of ICT in healthcare delivery in other parts of the world, there is no active eHealth initiatives working well in our part of the world. The problem is simply and partly due to lack of existing repository on eHealth in Ghana.

Mr Afari said it is particularly difficult to find information about eHealth in Ghana. He indicated the lack of eHealth projects making it quite difficult to search for information on best practices in Ghana. He lamented on the fact that he collects information through the use of search engines such as google, Medline, journal on telemedicine and e-health for eHealth projects in other countries.

"Sometimes I have to follows up on some authors undertaking some projects elsewhere and by the use of other reference materials for information. There is no much data and content available on the internet about eHealth in Ghana". Afari

He said ICT offer huge opportunities that can be shared with the disadvantaged in our communities to the benefit of all man kind.

He said most of these applications work through good networks by service providers but it is sad that some service providers make empty noise in Accra but do not have network coverage/presence in the other part of the country especially Northern region. He added that for some of the eHealth systems to be effective, the service providers must be partnered in order to sell the ideas to them so that they can help expand and build good infrastructure for the benefit of all.

"People are suffering series of health impediment but with telemedicine one can sit in his/her house and text his/her problem to a doctor instead of standing in a long queue in the hospital with the hope of seeing a doctor" Mr. Afari

He said it is a good thing to have the MoTECH system being implemented in other regions but wondering if Ghana has learnt lessons from the MoTECH implementation from other region before moving to news ones. He added that the MoTECH has two parts with one caring for the nurses and the other caring for the Doctors.

He talked about the work of the Ghana Health Informatics Association saying that it is set up basically among other things to advice whoever wants to implement any eHealth project in Ghana.

The eHealth strategic document has been developed for us but we are not implementing it.

With e-commerce everything should be online, building large buildings or hospitals will not solve the health problems of Ghanaians but developing telemedicine applications will go a long way to help reduce health related issues and improve health care delivery.

He mentioned the Tanzanian system where health professionals collaborate remotely to help colleague doctors to solve some medical and health problems.

He cited an example of a boy who is 14years with serious skin diseases where other specialist prescribes various medication or treatments to help solve such problem.

He urged all participants help to champion the successfully implementation of e-Health Projects in Ghana through the power of Information Communication Technology.