

Weaving ICT into the fabric of the health system

Professor Yunkap Kwankam highlights some upcoming meetings



People, the key to eHealth

The power of ICT to transform health systems is increasingly undisputed. However, in order for eHealth to take root and grow in countries, it itself needs to be transformed from the passion of a select few, to a mainstream activity of the entire health system. We must weave ICT into the fabric of the health system. We must also advance from individual pilot projects to fully scaled-up and coordinated programmes, in telemedicine, eLearning, electronic health records, health promotion, etc. This requires a vision, and a roadmap – usually embodied in a national eHealth strategy. Hence due emphasis and importance must be given to the development of national strategies.

But, how do we do ensure that this eHealth internal transformation takes place? First let's look at the eHealth revolution. It is predicated on the trinity of people, processes, and technology. People are the key, because although technology and processes can change people, the greater influence pathways are those of people changing processes and technology – through inventiveness, innovation, creativity. And one of the leaders in organising people in the field of eHealth is the International Society for Telemedicine and eHealth (ISfTeH), a federation of national professional societies, with institutional, corporate, and individual members in over 60 countries on 6 continents (see www.isfteh.org).

Upcoming events in Africa

The ISfTeH carries out its mission through its programme of activities, which include holding a number of key events each year. There is the fixed event, Med-e-Tel, in Luxembourg every April, and the annual international conference which moves from continent to continent, to accommodate the breadth and scope of the society's membership. The 16th such annual event will take place together with the second Southern African Telemedicine Conference on 14–15 September 2011 in Cape Town, South Africa. The theme of the conference is 'Prove your Hypothesis!' The event is organised by the South

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African Medical Research Council and Stellenbosch University, in conjunction with the ISfTeH. More information is available on the conference website – www.satelemedicine.co.za/conference.

Another event sponsored by the ISfTeH on the African continent this year is AfriHealth, to be held on 30 November–1 December, at the Kenyatta International Conference Center in Nairobi Kenya. The Conference follows on previous editions which covered themes such as: Advancing ICT for Patient Safety in Healthcare in Africa (2007); Changing the Pace of Healthcare in Africa (2008); and 'ICT in Healthcare – Are we doing enough for Africa?' (2009). For more information, visit www.aitecafrihealth.com/event/view/74.

Management challenges in eHealth in Africa

The theme of AfriHealth 2011 is 'Consolidating the gains of technological innovation through effective management'. It is premised on the recognition that management skills and capacity are a priority if we are to make the health technologies and systems that are so vigorously promoted, work effectively. The theme questions the extent to which current research and development using ICT and the effort being made to progress ICT developments in the African Healthcare arena. There is belief in some quarters that we can do much more than is presently being done for healthcare.

The call for papers is a wish list of topics that the organisers would like to cover to make the conference as comprehensive as possible, and to appeal to a wide-ranging audience of professionals and managers in the sector. There will be parallel sessions running throughout the programme in order to cater for special interest groups – in much the same way as the ISfTeH programme achieves in its Med-e-Tel event in Luxembourg.

Come one come all

Like other eHealth conferences, these two events will be meeting points for healthcare professionals of all stripes, and an opportunity for participants to share ideas, showcase developments, and develop action plans to speed up improvements in the industry. This writer will be at both events and I look forward to seeing you in large numbers in both Cape Town and Nairobi.