High-tech solutions to improve patient care in Africa

Healthcare is getting more high-tech - from electronic medical records and patient self-tracking to informatics and minimally invasive procedures - and nurses are at the forefront of using these innovative solutions to improve patient care in Africa.

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According to Professor Sharon Brownie, Dean of the School of Nursing and Midwifery, East Africa at the Aga Khan University, their curricula has been updated to include content about Information Technology and health informatics (acquiring, storing, retrieving and using of healthcare information to foster better collaboration among a patient's various healthcare providers).

Brownie, who will be sharing her insights at Africa Health, explains that the training nurses receive nowadays include: “How to work with electronic patient record and management systems including electronic patient booking systems; notification of lab results; health information messaging platforms; population health databases such as those for breast screening, vaccination, notifiable diseases; and use of everyday platforms, like Whatsapp, for patient communication and patient education.”

The integration of technology within the sector has become a priority for most governments. In South Africa, for example, the Department of Health has created a policy document outlining an ‘eHealth Strategy’ focused on improving patient information and technology systems.

Medical professionals are also learning from other regions where new technology has been implemented successfully. In the UAE, for example, the implementation of a fully integrated electronic medical record (EMR) system has put the region firmly at the forefront of technological innovations which save lives and prevent disease. Implemented in all government health facilities in 2017, the EMR has cut patient waiting times and allows patients to consult with their doctors even when they are not in the same location.

Associate Professor Jane Leanne Griffiths, the chief nursing information officer at the Dubai Health Authority, explains that the implementation of EMR has assisted nursing staff in executing their daily functions.

Big data analytics important for identifying health trends

Within the healthcare sector in general, 'big data' is the buzzword when it comes to analytics. It allows healthcare workers to identify important health trends and make decisions based on these findings.

Griffiths says these analysis techniques are used to identify potentially infectious diseases by examining outbreaks in other parts of the world. These findings are then used to identify potential cases in their own patients, aiding early detection.

"One of the key positive spin-offs of implementing an EMR is the big data and analytics that can be used to make ongoing strategic health decisions. This potential for this data to be used as a platform to leverage other technologies such as home care, artificial intelligence and blockchain are almost unlimited," says Griffiths.

"Big data also plays a key role in nursing education. She says informatics skills are being taught in light of the importance of big data and analytics which in the nursing context is mainly focused on epidemiology, statistics and population health research," points out Brownie. She stresses the importance for educators to stay current and to keep up with trends. "Educators need to be active in continuous review and update of curricula and all teaching-learning materials to ensure they are contemporary and forward thinking on technological matters."

Both Brownie and Griffiths will be sharing their experiences at the Nursing Conference that will take place at the Africa Health Exhibition & Congress from the 29-31 May 2018 at the Gallagher Convention Centre in Midrand.

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