



# Evaluating Nigeria's Healthcare System in the Post-COVID Era: Challenges, Achievements, and Future Directions

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## Dear Editor,

This letter aims to highlight the improvements made in Nigeria's healthcare system as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also addressing ongoing challenges and proposing recommendations for future advancement. The pandemic exposed significant inadequacies within the healthcare system, including delays in access to essential medical supplies, inadequate health financing, a shortage of healthcare personnel, and ineffective leadership. However, the crisis also served as a catalyst for progress in specific areas.<sup>1</sup> For instance, it expedited the adoption of telemedicine and digital health solutions, facilitating remote consultations and improving access to healthcare services.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there has been an increased emphasis on public health awareness and education, which has enhanced health promotion and preventive practices within communities.<sup>2</sup>

The healthcare system has utilized e-learning to strengthen the healthcare workforce in Nigeria and enhance the competencies of health practitioners. This approach conserves resources while providing high-quality training to a broader audience, ensuring that healthcare professionals are adequately equipped to deliver effective patient care.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, during the pandemic, a surge of novel information and research emerged. This prompted the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (NCDC) to issue timely public health guidance, effectively disseminating case specifications and preventive information across networks of national and subnational public health workers.<sup>4</sup> Numerous media channels were also leveraged to enhance the dissemination of information.<sup>4</sup> All of these efforts contributed to strengthening the capacity of the health information system.

While these technological advancements signify considerable progress, systemic issues such as financial constraints and workforce shortages continue to challenge the healthcare system. First, the nation's health

system grapples with significant financial challenges. Poor working conditions for employees, a lack of facilities and modern technology to support healthcare delivery, and insufficient supplies of pharmaceuticals and hospital beds are all consequences of the government's limited financial support.<sup>5</sup> Due to the inadequate healthcare systems, many Nigerians are increasingly turning to medical tourism, recognizing the importance of accessing competent medical care and expressing dissatisfaction with the intervention programs available in the country. Consequently, more than 5000 Nigerians travel abroad every month for medical treatment, resulting in an estimated economic loss of 1.2 billion US dollars annually.<sup>6</sup>

The lack of human resources remains a significant challenge for the health sector in Nigeria in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The individuals responsible for overseeing and delivering healthcare services are crucial to the functioning of the system. However, healthcare staff have not received the attention and support they deserve, leading to health systems that struggle to effectively address health issues and emergencies. Furthermore, the failure of the Nigerian health sector to meet the World Health Organization's (WHO's) recommended ratio of one doctor for every 500 patients has resulted in healthcare personnel experiencing excessive stress.<sup>7</sup> At times, patients are forced to wait in long queues for hours, which can be life-threatening in cases of serious conditions, potentially resulting in the patient's demise.<sup>5,8</sup>

The leadership and governance of the health system in Nigeria could be significantly improved, as both the government's oversight and its involvement in health policy are inadequate. Key issues in leadership and management include a lack of political will, exploitation of healthcare systems, inefficient resource management, and insufficient integration of healthcare services. These challenges can lead to increased healthcare costs, decreased efficiency and effectiveness, low patient satisfaction, and

poor health outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

In the post-COVID-19 era, Nigeria must prioritize addressing the issues within its healthcare system to improve the well-being of its citizens. Recognizing the healthcare workforce as the nation's most invaluable asset is crucial, as it represents the primary investment in the healthcare sector.<sup>7</sup> To enhance the capabilities of healthcare professionals in Nigeria, it is essential to create incentives for them to pursue specialized training. Encouraging active participation in conferences, workshops, and online courses will help healthcare workers stay informed about the latest developments in their fields. Establishing mandatory continuing education requirements for healthcare professionals is crucial to ensure that they remain updated with current practices and innovations. Additionally, mentorship programs should be implemented, allowing experienced healthcare professionals to guide and support newer colleagues. This approach fosters skill transfers and contributes to long-term workforce sustainability. For example, initiatives similar to the WHO's "Workforce 2030" strategy could be tailored to address Nigeria's specific healthcare needs, ensuring that the workforce is well-equipped to meet the challenges of the evolving health landscape.

Improving the healthcare system in Nigeria through technological advancements is essential for enhancing patient care, increasing efficiency, and reducing costs. One key area for development is the expansion of telemedicine beyond urban centers to reach rural and underserved areas where access to healthcare is limited. Specific strategies to achieve this include:

*Mobile health clinics:* Deploying mobile health clinics equipped with internet-enabled devices for video consultations can facilitate healthcare delivery in remote areas.

*Telemedicine hubs:* Establishing telemedicine hubs in primary healthcare centers can serve as focal points for remote consultations, enabling patients to receive care without traveling long distances.

*Remote monitoring technologies:* Developing remote technological methods to track symptomatic conditions can enable healthcare providers to offer rapid interventions, thereby reducing the need for hospital admissions.

*Standardized Data Exchange Protocols:* Implementing standardized data exchange protocols will ensure seamless sharing of health information among healthcare providers, improving coordination and continuity of care.

*Data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI):* Emphasizing the use of data analytics and AI can help identify trends and health patterns, facilitate early detection of disease outbreaks, and optimize resource utilization. AI-powered diagnostic tools, especially those used for early detection of diabetes or cancer, can be integrated into Nigeria's healthcare system to enhance diagnostic accuracy.

While these technological advancements represent

significant progress, systemic challenges such as financial constraints and workforce shortages continue to hinder the overall improvement of the healthcare system. Addressing these issues is critical for achieving sustainable growth in Nigeria's healthcare sector.

To enhance the healthcare system in Nigeria, the government should allocate a higher percentage of the national budget to healthcare, aiming for at least the 15% benchmark established by the Abuja Declaration. This increased funding is essential for improving healthcare infrastructure, training healthcare professionals, and providing necessary resources. Additionally, the government should develop and implement comprehensive policies aimed at achieving the objective of universal health coverage (UHC). This goal focuses on ensuring that all Nigerians have access to essential healthcare services without experiencing financial hardship. By prioritizing these initiatives, the government can work towards a more equitable healthcare system that meets the needs of its population and promotes overall health and well-being.<sup>9</sup> The government should also collaborate with international organizations, universities, and healthcare institutions to provide opportunities for the Nigerian healthcare system and launch nationwide health education campaigns to raise awareness about improving it.

Policies should be made to foster the establishment of research centers that will encourage healthcare professionals to engage in research and innovation. The current coverage of the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) should be expanded and made more accessible, especially to the rural populations. Healthcare regulatory agencies should implement effective supervision mechanisms to ensure the quality of healthcare services, pharmaceuticals, and medical devices. Considering the unique socioeconomic and infrastructure challenges in Nigeria, implementing these strategies may put the country at risk. Therefore, proper and long-lasting health policies must be developed, employing health policymakers and advisors with access to scientific information and research.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Policies for the post-pandemic era should be developed and implemented, ensuring that healthcare facilities are adequately equipped to respond to emergencies. Policies should be reviewed periodically to ensure they remain effective and responsive to changing healthcare needs and challenges. The journey towards improving the health system, achieving the objectives of UHC, and enhancing health indicators in Nigeria remains a considerable challenge. However, Nigeria can significantly improve its healthcare system by prioritizing these recommendations.

## Authors' Contribution

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#### Competing Interests

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#### Ethical Approval

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