

mCONSULTING AS AN OPTION FOR IMPROVING ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE IN NIGERIA

Summary

Mobile phone consultations with healthcare providers (mConsulting) is an innovative way to make quality healthcare universally available. This is particularly critical in countries such as Nigeria where access to healthcare is less than optimal.

While this innovation is likely to improve accessibility to healthcare, it is important to regulate the practice to assure quality and mitigate harm.

mConsulting services have been introduced into Nigeria without the existence of a policy and regulatory framework.

This brief examines its usage, regulations and modes of operation in Nigeria and possible policy responses.

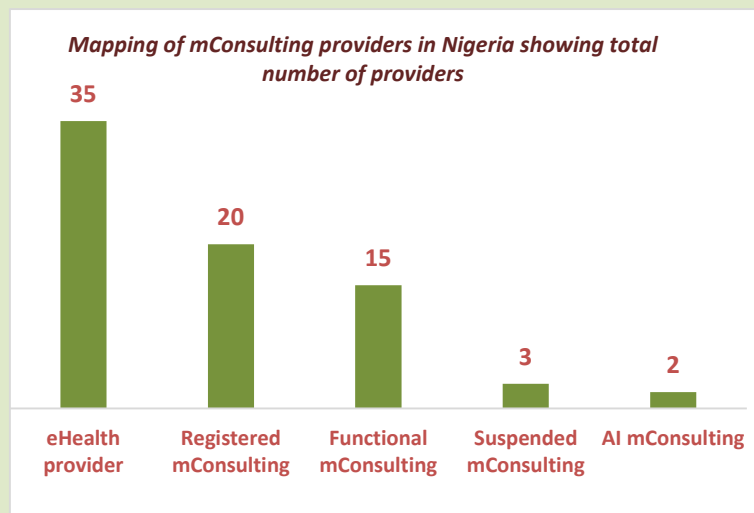
mConsulting in Nigeria?

mConsulting is when a person, with a perceived health need, consults a healthcare provider using mobile communication technology, or a provider contacts their patient. This also includes a situation where the person with a healthcare need requests an intermediary, such as a relative or community health-worker, to assist them with mConsulting.

Evidence from other Low and Middle Income Countries (LMIC) indicate that the use of digital and mobile communication technology for healthcare can improve management of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Ultimately, it has the potential of increasing access to healthcare services in low resource settings.

The rapid expansion in the use of mobile communication technology in Nigeria provides an additional platform for mConsulting for improving access to quality healthcare and mitigating health disparities. However, there is limited information about the regulatory framework for mConsulting in Nigeria. This policy brief reports on findings from a study on the current status of mConsulting in Nigeria and offers suggestions on policy options.

A Synopsis of Current mConsulting Situation in Nigeria:



Mode of interactions with Clients in Nigeria



More facts on mConsulting in Nigeria...

Cost of mConsulting (n)			
Free	<N2,000	N2,000+	Consultation fee not stated
(2)	(4)	(3)	(6)

Providers' targeted population (n)			
General	>16 years old	Pregnant women/new mothers	Elderly
(12)	(1)	(3)	(1)

mConsulting referral systems (n)				
Referral	Drug prescription	Provide info on hospitals	Follow up	Keep Record
(8)	(5)	(1)	(4)	(8)

No specific national policy on mConsulting in Nigeria

Stakeholders' Views...

Stakeholders hold disparate views about mConsulting policy and regulations in Nigeria. Stakeholders views about mConsulting policy and regulations in Nigeria. Some had no knowledge of any existing policy. Others insisted that there were policies but these were fragmented with differences at national and state levels. Some likened the lack of explicit policies on mConsulting in Nigeria to the general problem that policies are not keeping up with the rapid changes that come with innovation. One stakeholder stated: *"innovation especially when it's very rapid, and especially now in technology, is moving light years ahead of the capacity of regulators to stay up to date."* (IDI/Digital expert 2/male).

Closing the Policy Gap:

First of All: Data privacy and vulnerability of clients' information to data theft remains a grave concern. Currently, cybercrime is a major challenge for law enforcement agencies in Nigeria.

Secondly: Lack of effective regulatory environment potentiates the danger to quality control.

Thirdly: To be effective, mConsulting must have harmonized laws and regulations which operate within a particular Information and Communication Technology (ICT) environment and infrastructure. Such a policy environment includes extant regulations on data collection and security, and ICT regulations on the whole.

CONCLUSIONS

- There are already existing formal mConsulting service platforms in Nigeria which are being utilized by the clients.
- Individual healthcare workers are engaging in mConsulting practices without prior training which may result in negative unintended consequences, including reduction in its potential to strengthen the health system.
- mConsulting is currently being implemented despite the absence of an existing policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A definite policy should be in place to regulate the use of information technology in health which could be incorporated within the existing ICT policy document.
- Policy should assure quality in digital healthcare using the principles that already govern the healthcare consultation such as professionalism and confidentiality.