

Saving lives through stronger health supply chains

Effective procurement and supply chain management are essential aspects of successful health systems.

Maya Jaffe reports



A reliable and cost-effective supply of medical products and equipment is essential for every health system. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies equitable access to medical products, vaccines, and other technologies as one of the six building blocks of a well-functioning health system.

Effective and strong procurement and supply chain systems with robust human resource support are crucial for health systems strengthening and for enabling countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

Without a timely and adequate supply of efficacious drugs, vaccines and other related health products, governments would be unable to tackle public health initiatives to prevent, treat, and control life-threatening diseases and health budgets will be wasted.

Yet, historically, procurement and supply chain management have been undervalued and viewed as a process rather than a key component of health systems strengthening. Many health institutions have recruited clinical staff without the appropriate expertise to manage supply chains, resulting in poor cost-effectiveness and unreliable access to medicines.

Major commodity scale-up programmes to combat diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis have helped to highlight the importance of strong procurement and supply chain systems due to the critical need for regular access to medical supplies, but more needs to be done to raise the profile of supply chain management in health institutions.

We have been invited to use this page in *Africa Health* to discuss best practice in procurement and supply-line management. This introductory piece gives some background to our credentials – we'll get onto the real technical aspects in subsequent editions.

Crown Agents is an international development company and a recognised leader in the provision of technical assistance, advice, and training to support public sector modernisation. We work on the basis of long-term partnerships with our clients to reduce poverty, improve health and increase prosperity for sustainable development and growth.

We provide tailored, flexible responses that ensure

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essential medical supplies are delivered wherever they are needed, quickly and cost-effectively. For example, we have experience of modernising central medical stores in Rwanda and Botswana under the USAID-funded Supply Chain Management System project and since 2004 we have worked with the government of Zambia to ensure the distribution of essential medical supplies to 120 facilities across the country.

Our partnership with Zambia has transformed the country's Medical Stores Limited into an efficient and demand-led organisation that is recognised as a model for medical stores operations in sub-Saharan Africa. An important part of this included professionalising the workforce to improve staff morale and overall performance. President Bill Clinton described the facility as 'a magnificent distribution centre and the sort of thing we need to do for the rest of Africa.'

Elsewhere, we managed DFID's Health Commodities Project in Nigeria from 2005–2009 to ensure the sustainable supply of medical supplies to five focus states. Our work on this project helped provide 20 million Nigerians with access to basic services, including essential drugs and equipment.

Responding to major diseases and building a sustainable health service requires a well-focused team of professionals. Good supply chain systems and processes are useless without qualified and motivated staff to run and manage them. Most recently, we have provided technical support to and are an active stakeholder in the 'People That Deliver' initiative (see <http://www.people-thatdeliver.org/>), which promotes workforce excellence in supply chain management.

