Addressing quality gaps in African health systems



Francis Omaswa highlights the challenge of weak quality assurance mechanisms in health systems in Africa with examples from the laboratory.

In the social media and during networking with colleagues, there are concerns expressed about the quality of health care in our countries. Examples range from unqualified individuals acting as registered medical practitioners when they have never undergone medical training, there are reports of surgical procedures gone wrong or undertaken when they are not indicated both by practitioners with inadequate training or no formal training at all.

The public is trusting and undergo these experiences sometimes not even aware that something wrong has happened to them or their loved ones in their health system.

The challenge we face is weak quality assurance mechanisms in our health systems. There are many people whose medical problems are caused or made worse by poor quality health care. How can we strengthen and institutionalize quality in our health systems? Some years ago, I was the Head of the Quality Assurance program in the Ministry of Health in Uganda and I undertook training on the subject of quality assurance of health care including launching a movement on this subject located at the East, Central and Southern African Health Community. We encouraged all countries to adopt the Quality Assurance Approach in their health systems and we set up the Regional Center for Quality of Health Care at Makerere University and authored a Q A Handbook.

Quality has many definitions and relevant ones include "Performing according to set standards," "Meetings the needs of clients", "Best performance with available resources" and "Doing the right thing the right way at the right time" etc. A continuous quality improvement approach requires leadership from the top including the Health Ministers and senior leadership teams all of whom should undergo appropriate orientation. It calls for pursuit of excellence and total rejection of errors. It is also dependent on country context including politics, culture and resources. It calls for the establishment of strong regulatory bodies, strict and independent accreditation programs for health services delivery institutions and for individuals. Regular supportive supervision at all levels of the health system that wins the rust and respect of those who are supervised and encourages routine self-assessment.

Equally important is educated demand for quality from the population served who will be the first to point out weaknesses and lapses in quality of health care and can provide joint solutions.

A colleague recently expressed this concern regarding the quality of laboratory services as follows:

"Unchecked Labs, Uncertain Results: The Need for Diagnostic Standards in Healthcare

Across the country, medical laboratories and diagnostic centers are multiplying rapidly—but without adequate regulation. While access has improved, many of these labs operate without meeting established standards, leading to unreliable and sometimes dangerously misleading results.

A troubling example involves a couple who turned to DNA testing to resolve a sensitive family issue. The emotional burden was heavy, yet results from two different labs were contradictory—raising serious concerns about accuracy, ethics, and potential manipulation.

Even routine tests show unacceptable variation. One patient recently received a hemoglobin result of 5 g/dL from one lab and 10 g/dL from another. These discrepancies are not trivial—they can determine whether a patient receives urgent care or is falsely reassured.

Worryingly, some clinicians have begun relying more on lab results than on clinical judgment, forgetting that diagnostics are meant to aid—not replace—sound medical reasoning.

To rebuild trust in diagnostics, we urgently need to enforce national standards and strengthen reference laboratories to ensure consistency, accountability, and quality. It's ironic that market scales used to be strictly regulated, yet we allow life-saving medical tests to go unchecked. This must change.

African health and development indices are lagging far behind those of other regions. We need to mobilize leadership at all levels. We have what it takes to close quality gaps in our health systems if we care and feel the pain and shame.

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