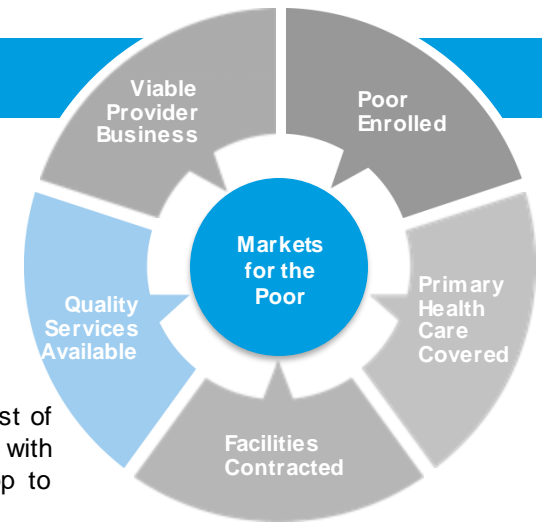


The PharmAccess Nigeria team introduced the use of WhatsApp to facilitate communications with AHME healthcare providers in franchise networks in Ogun State. The goal has been to improve efficiency and cost savings in technical support, while helping to establish a culture of quality improvement among the providers.



SafeCare is a stepwise quality improvement program for small-scale health providers, who offer care to most of the country’s poor. On-site technical assistance is key, but limited, due to the costs and time associated with working in remote areas. This snapshot considers how the PharmAccess Nigeria team used WhatsApp to streamline the quality improvement process, while creating a new community of (quality) practice.



Intervention

In Ogun State, the PharmAccess team provided business and clinical quality assessments for 60 small-scale private healthcare facilities. A baseline assessment was used to design tailored quality improvement plans for both management and service delivery. Providers then received technical support to help them adhere to their plans’ guidelines and recommendations.

The providers often had difficulty integrating the quality improvement activities within their practices. Quality facilitators were assigned to offer assistance on site. Because the providers were widely dispersed, the team searched for a way to compliment the on-site visits with remote interactions that could be conducted more frequently.

The team came up with the idea of using mobile technology as a simple solution that could be deployed quickly, easily, and at low cost. The WhatsApp platform was adopted to connect and communicate with providers on an informal trial basis.

Providers were invited to join a WhatsApp facilitation group, and those who self-selected to take part were trained to download and use the application. Two WhatsApp groups were formed, each consisting of 15 providers and a quality officer.

From August 2015 to January 2016, the groups conducted weekly WhatsApp meetings. Each one focused on a particular theme and set of quality improvement activities that were distinct and achievable, such as how to set up a standardized hand-washing system. The importance of each element was discussed, along with practical details on how to implement changes. Providers were expected to take up the quality improvement task and send a photo to the rest of the group.

The peer-to-peer aspect of the intervention drove participating providers to become more engaged with the weekly quality improvement topics, and with each other. The conversations engendered healthy competition among providers, spurring them to go even further with ways to apply quality improvements. The weekly discussions helped to make the on-site visits more productive, while cutting down on travel time and costs, which are the main cost drivers of the quality improvement facilitation.

Following the positive responses to the initial trial, the team has now launched a formal 6-month pilot of the WhatsApp groups. The pilot will include measurements of costs and benefits aligned with the SafeCare quality improvement process. Like the initial trial, it will include 30 providers, split into two groups, and supported by the quality officers.

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Result

Anecdotal responses were overwhelmingly positive, and SafeCare assessments of six of the Marie Stopes supported health care providers found that three of them, which had been very active in the WhatsApp discussions, had risen from SafeCare Level 1 to a Level 2. Formal results remain to be tested in the follow-up pilot.



Examples and Evidence

"I feel delighted and more empowered about this quality improvement plan, in fact it has really touched me and has upgraded my facility – especially in the areas of hygiene, stock keeping, and waste management. Thanks for your support."

Mrs. Popoola Janet Kehinde, Registered Nurse/Owner of Dabfek



Lessons Learned

WhatsApp is a cheap and effective way to connect groups remotely. It has been important in motivating providers and creating a culture of quality improvement through regular communications. The WhatsApp outreach provides a strong value-added and compliment to on-site facilitation, but cannot replace it entirely. Engaging providers is a process which requires work and time. It is critical for ensuring that quality changes are institutionalized and sustained over time.



Outlook

The initial trial was implemented as a stop-gap measure. The current pilot presents an opportunity to better define the WhatsApp component and how to combine it more formally with on-site facilitation for the quality improvement process. The pilot is set to measure the potential for improving access and efficiency in technical support, cost savings in terms of travel and logistics, and the development of a culture of quality improvement among small-scale healthcare providers.