



## Using e-psychiatry to Scale up Mental Health Services in Nigeria

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A recent primary care study in Nigeria revealed that psychiatric disorders were common, with unexplained somatic complaints occurring in 57.5% of respondents, depression in 50%, anxiety disorders 49.3%, primary insomnia 45.3%, and alcohol use disorder 11.3% [1]. Other studies indicate that a broad range of psychiatric disorders are seen in Nigeria including mental retardation, epilepsy, conduct disorders, substance abuse psychosis, affective disorders, substance abuse, sexual dysfunction among others [2-8]. One of the major challenges in treating mental illness in Nigeria is the dearth of mental health care facilities and mental health care professionals [9] with the result that about 70% of mental health service provision in Nigeria is delivered through non-orthodox means such as religious organisations and traditional healers [10]. In spite of this high prevalence, primary care practitioners have constraints in identifying about one-third of patients with mental health problems [11], for various reasons where the patients are able to make it to the hospital. Thus, the task of identifying and treating patients with psychiatric disorders falls on the mental health professionals.

In 2006, the world health organization conducted a study in Nigeria in which the mental health facilities were assessed in six states in the six geopolitical zones of the country [12]. The study showed that the number of human resources working in mental health facilities in the surveyed states was 3,105. The number of professionals available to the population per 100,000 is as follows: Psychiatrists 0.15, other medical doctors 0.49, Nurses 2.41, Psychologists 0.07, Social workers 0.12, Occupational therapists 0.05, and other health or mental health workers 8.03. Obviously from the foregoing, the number of professionals available cannot meet the needs of the populace, meaning there is a need to scale up the extent of the available mental health services. A national Literacy Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in Nigeria estimates the adult literacy rate as 56.9 percent, though with significant differences between states (Lagos 92.0% and Borno only 14.5%), regions (urban 74.6% and rural 48.7%) and gender (male 65.1% and female 48.6%) [13].

In the last decade, internet use has become a mainstay of the life of Nigerians. As at 2011, about 45,039,711 (26.5%) of Nigerians were using the internet [14] and this figure is likely to have increased over the years given the rate of growth of the telecoms sector in the country. These statistics suggest a good number of Nigerians can be engaged in meaningful discussions online, including discussions on mental health. The internet has several advantages in the delivery of mental health. These include but are not limited to: cost reduction; promotion of conventional service delivery, facilitation of consumer empowerment, and improved access [15].

Given the fact that mental health facilities in Nigeria are inadequate, and that it would take some time before resources especially human can be mustered, it is only logical that remedial alternative means of assessing mental health care such as the internet be sought. The advantages are enormous and will only complement manpower if manpower becomes available subsequently. The most significant advantage of e-psychiatry in a developing country like Nigeria may be in the aspect of cost reduction because even in government hospitals where treatment is

taken to be relatively cheap, the consultation fee is reported anecdotally to be about five hundred naira (over 3 dollars), which when added to the cost of transportation to the health facility becomes burdensome for the patient. The cost of care delays health seeking behaviour and this increases the chances of relapse in such patients. To the knowledge of the author, there are no Nigerian forums for patients with mental health issues to relate with their caregivers. E-psychiatry will also be useful for mental health advocacy and promotion where 'well individuals' receive information on mental health promotion. Challenges to e-psychiatry will include a lack of adequate power supply, fluctuating internet service, a dearth of skilled health workers to provide the service, ethical issues especially with respect to children and possibly false alarms or prank alerts. Also, the cost of the requisite infrastructure to sustain it will challenge most developing countries. The use of electronic media to promote mental health is a part of the future of clinical practice in the third world which will also become a virtual world in the near future. Efforts must be made at the individual, organizational and governmental levels to tap into this potentially rewarding way of mental health care, through which health for all may be achieved.

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Received February 08, 2014; Accepted March 17, 2014; Published March 22, 2014

Citation: Abdulazeez NT, Kayode OA (2014) Using e-psychiatry to Scale up Mental Health Services in Nigeria. *J Mass Communicat Journalism* 4: 184. doi:10.4172/2165-7912.1000184

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**Citation:** Abdulazeez NT, Kayode OA (2014) Using e-psychiatry to Scale up Mental Health Services in Nigeria. J Mass Communicat Journalism 4: 184. doi:[10.4172/2165-7912.1000184](https://doi.org/10.4172/2165-7912.1000184)

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