



# Healthy prospects

Nigeria's healthcare sector is ripe for transformation and opportunities for investors are opening up

**THE INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES** available in the Nigerian health sector would be best illustrated by exposing the present healthcare situation – the present reality and goals. The initiatives for reaching those goals involve the need for huge financial outlays that present the investment opportunities.

In his paper delivered at a high-level forum on health in Abuja on 9 November 2009, 'Health Sector Analysis in Nigeria: Implementing the Health Sector Component of Vision 2020', the then-federal minister of health, Professor Babatunde Osotimehin said: "It is evident that our current health situation is deplorable and unacceptable. We need to move from cataloguing

problems to proffering and implementing solutions through effective implementation of the health sector component of Vision 2020.

The review of the current health situation shows that we are presently not on course in the achievement of the health-related Millennium Development Goal, [MDG] by 2015. The evidence from available information indicates unequivocally that the average health status of our citizens is unacceptable."

The statistics which the honorable minister, himself a Professor of Medicine, read to his audience simply confirm the sad situation of healthcare in Nigeria. Some of these statistics need repeating here to underscore for the prospective investor the immense gap between the reality on the ground and the goals which also indicate the equally immense open opportunities. The average number of hospital beds in the public sector is 9.2 per 10,000. Nigeria has only 1.6 public primary healthcare facilities per 10,000 people, and Lagos has the lowest number of primary care facilities, perhaps because there is

## VISION 2020 FOCUS ON HEALTHCARE

- To reduce the infant mortality rate to 7.5% by 2020, which is currently 300 per 100,000.
- To reduce under-five mortality from 189 per 1,000 to 75.
- To reduce under-five malnutrition from 53% to less than 20% by 2015.
- To increase life expectancy of Nigerians from 47 years to 70.
- To reduce HIV/AIDS prevalence.

private sector dominance in the state, which the rate here does not reflect. The availability of voluntary counselling and testing (VCT), prevention of mother to child transmission (PMTCT), and anti-retroviral therapy (ART) services in the public sector are very limited, with only about 1 per cent of all public sector facilities reporting that they provide PMTCT or ART services, and 2.2 per cent reporting any VCT service. Professor Osotimehin was also seriously concerned about the inadequate laboratory service support, without which overall health service delivery would be hampered. The findings of an assessment by the Federal Ministry of Health that just above 6 per cent of public sector facilities had laboratory service, is also cause for concern.

Professor Osotimehin was admitting the obvious, and like some others involved in Nigeria's healthcare, attributed the situation to among other things, inadequate and poorly maintained facilities, unacceptable ratio of doctors to patients and inefficient service delivery.

### The health sector and Vision 2020

Nigeria ranks low in the Human Development Indicators for health. Policymakers fear that MDG targets will be missed. The government's strategy to remedy the situation is part of the Vision 2020 policy discussion. Vision 2020 is a ten-year plan to grow the economy to be one of the 20 biggest in the world by the year 2020.

To achieve these goals, the government would ensure that there is proper co-ordination among all stakeholders. The National Health Bill, (May 2008) is expected to clarify structure, roles and responsibilities at each level, and will give legal backing to a funding mechanism. Drugs and vaccines should be within reach, physically and financially, by increasing local production from 40 per cent to 80 per cent of national need. The current low coverage of the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), and the Community Health Insurance would be expanded. The general initiatives include, but are not limited to:

- the provision of one adequately staffed and equipped primary healthcare facility in each ward;
- provision of adequate infrastructure and well maintained equipment through partnership with the private sector;

- greater secondary and tertiary healthcare coverage with one general hospital in each of the 774 local government areas with specialists in surgery, paediatrics, medicine, and obstetrics and gynaecology. All teaching hospitals, federal medical centres, specialist centres and general hospitals would be re-equipped;
- intensification of the Polio Eradication Initiative;
- provision of well-equipped ambulance services that are capable of emergency treatment of casualties on the way to the reception centres;
- increase in the ratio of doctor to patient; and
- provision of adequate and reliable laboratory support (results from many private sector laboratories are unreliable).

Discussions with those in the field reveal general agreement with the position of the minister, and Vision 2020. Doctors advise particularly that any investor in the healthcare sector should give due consideration to the development and provision of child and maternal health equipment, orthopaedic centres and equipment, co-operation with referring clinics and hospitals and equipping intensive care units.

There is also a need for the development of specialist centres where non-resident specialists may come to perform procedures at a fee, comprehensive health screening facilities, hospital management services and the provision of capacity building support.

Nigeria is also suffering from a lack of worksite clinics and investigative equipment. Abuja has only two MRI machines and community health is poor.

It is clear that so much is required to be done that many opportunities exist for the willing investor, who must have an enabling environment conducive to doing business.

The participation of the private sector to achieve the objectives in Vision 2020 is imperative, hence government effort to establish a competitive and investor-friendly environment.

Doing business in Nigeria is not without its challenges, but they are not disabling, especially as the thrust of government policy is to eliminate or minimise them. Complaints are usually about poor infrastructure, limited access to funding, corruption, inflation, crime, inefficient bureaucracy, tax rates, poor public health and foreign currency regulation. The government, in its steady drive towards a market economy, is making a sustained effort to address the problem by such agencies as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission. The two agencies work to fight corruption both in the public and private sectors. Reforms are also underway in the financial and banking sector, including currency regulation and repatriation of profits. The government has also set up the Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission, which includes a one-stop investment centre to ease the investment process.

Despite these challenges, there are many investment opportunities in Nigeria's health sector. It's an open field. ■

Volunteer Health officials wait to immunise children at a school in Nigeria's capital Abuja