

Transforming Ghana's Healthcare System Through Community Pharmacies

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The Hidden Potential of Community Pharmacies

In Ghana, community pharmacies are a lifeline for many individuals, particularly those in underserved areas where hospitals are far and few between. These pharmacies are often the first—and sometimes the only—point of contact for healthcare. Yet, despite their critical role, they remain underutilized, serving primarily as medication dispensaries.

Imagine Kwame, a farmer in rural Ghana who travels miles to his nearest pharmacy for diabetes medication. He has questions about managing his condition but finds no one at the pharmacy able to provide consultations or follow-ups. Without guidance, Kwame struggles to adhere to his medication plan, leading to complications and costly hospitalizations. Kwame's story is not unique—it reflects the challenges faced by millions of Ghanaians who rely on pharmacies but are underserved by their limited scope of care.

Why the Current System Is Failing

This gap in patient-centered services has significant repercussions. Chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes are poorly managed, resulting in preventable deaths and high treatment costs for families and the healthcare system. The burden is not just financial but also social, as health disparities deepen in underserved regions.

With over 30% of Ghana's population depending on pharmacies as their primary healthcare access point, the lack of consultations, follow-ups, and health screenings represents a missed opportunity to improve health outcomes. This problem is exacerbated by limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and the absence of policies supporting patient-centered care in pharmacies.

A Vision for Transforming Pharmacies into Healthcare Hubs

To address this pressing issue, I propose transforming community pharmacies into healthcare hubs that deliver comprehensive care. With my background as a pharmacist, software engineer, and health informatics specialist, I believe digital health innovation is the key to this transformation.

The solution lies in a three-pronged strategy:

- **Digital Health Platform:** Tools to enhance patient engagement, including automated follow-up reminders, virtual consultations, and inventory management to prevent

stockouts. Patients like Kwame could access care remotely, book health screenings, and receive medication reminders—all from their local pharmacy.

- **Pharmacy Performance Assessment Tool:** A framework to measure service quality, patient satisfaction, and operational efficiency, enabling pharmacies to continuously optimize their services.
- **Cleaning and Hygiene Checklist:** Protocols to maintain high cleanliness standards, building trust and ensuring patient safety.

Reaping the Benefits of Patient-Centered Pharmacies

This transformation offers far-reaching benefits. Pharmacies equipped with digital tools and staffed with PharmDs (Doctor of Pharmacy professionals) can provide consultations, manage chronic diseases, and deliver preventative care—all while reducing the burden on hospitals. Patients would no longer have to travel long distances for healthcare, and pharmacies would become trusted centers for wellness within their communities.

The economic rationale is equally compelling. Preventing complications from chronic diseases lowers healthcare costs for families and the government. Pharmacies can diversify revenue streams by offering value-added services, while a healthier population contributes to greater productivity and economic growth.

Evidence of Success

This vision is not just aspirational—it is achievable. Case studies from Kenya and the Philippines show how digital health tools integrated into pharmacies improved medication adherence and reduced hospital visits. Ghana's National Electronic Pharmacy Platform (NEPP) already demonstrates the feasibility of scaling digital health interventions in the country, providing a strong foundation for further innovation.

Policies to Drive Transformation

For this vision to become a reality, supportive policies are essential. Key measures include:

- **Incentives for Digital Adoption:** Tax breaks, grants, and low-interest loans for pharmacies investing in digital health solutions.
- **Mandatory PharmD Integration:** Requiring pharmacies to employ PharmDs to deliver clinical care and consultations.
- **Nationwide Training Programs:** Improving digital literacy among pharmacy staff to maximize the impact of digital tools.
- **Regulatory Frameworks:** Mandating the use of standardized tools for service quality assessments and operational improvements.

A Call to Action: Building a Healthier Ghana

The time to act is now. Community pharmacies are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap in healthcare delivery, but they need the right tools, policies, and support. By embracing digital health solutions, integrating PharmDs, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, we can transform these pharmacies into pillars of patient-centered care.

Kwame's story doesn't have to be the norm. With bold action, we can create a healthcare system where every patient, regardless of their location, receives the care they deserve. Together, let us build a healthier Ghana—one pharmacy at a time.