

# Science Nuggets (Health&Agriculture)

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## Embracing technology for more health workers



Amref Health Africa CEO, Dr Githinji Gitahi with Daniel Kumwenda

DOREEN NAWA, Lusaka

AT the beginning of 2014, the Ministry of Health, together with Child Fund International and Amref Health Africa went tech savvy and introduced e-learning for aspiring health workers.

On February 13, 2014, the programme for nurses was launched by former health minister Joseph Kasonde to help accelerate their training in line with the 21st century technology.

To live this dream, on Thursday September 14, 2017, 1,039 students from 10 health training institutions gathered at Ndola's Levy Mwanawasa Stadium to receive diplomas in nursing and certificates in midwifery at the largest ever graduation of health workers on the Copperbelt.

The event was the first of its kind on the Zambia soil as song and dance characterised the day as thousands of people turned up to witness the 41st combined graduation ceremony for registered nurses and midwives in Zambia.

The event was unique because among the graduates was the first-ever group of 67 e-Learning registered nurse students in the country, whose performance in the national examination was significantly higher than the national average.

One of the e-Learning graduates, Daniel Kumwenda says the experience was unique. "I feel exceptionally impressed with this achievement because it has helped me live my dream of being a pediatrician. I did my whole course through e-Learning and when it was time for practicals, we used to go to various health centres to execute whatever we needed to do at that particular point."

Mr Kumwenda, named best overall student in the e-Learning programme says he never took the programme for granted but instead, believed in it and worked hard in order to be added to the statistics of nurses countrywide.

The 23-year-old graduate says, “I am passionate about pediatrics. I want to work with children. I also want to teach others so that they too can achieve their dreams.”

For Mr Kumwenda, he learnt how to divide his time, at first, it was challenging but with time, he went through it.

Asked what his motivation towards his excellent performance was, Mr Kumwenda said he researched more and dedicated his time to his studies.

“I received study material on time, like videos and other tutorials in audio. I feel what is needed is just commitment and nothing else, I believe being in class and studying on your own is just the same,” Mr Kumwenda said.

Mr Kumwenda said for the two year duration of his e-Learning course, he was in touch with tutors only for four months.

One of Mr Kumwenda’s appeal is to see the Zambia Nurses Lifeskills Training Programme, which uses e-learning technology to train nurses and midwives, with funding from the Mastercard Foundation, extend to all provincial centres in the country. Mr Kumwenda is aware that nursing is a hands-on programme and the fears of students missing out on practical should not arise because, this e-Learning course adequately takes care of that.

Present at the event were Group chief executive officer of Amref Health Africa, Dr Githinji Gitahi, CEO and President of ChildFund International, Anne Lynam Goddard and Program Manager for Youth Livelihoods at the Mastercard Foundation, Mr Koffi Assouan.

Amref Health Africa CEO Dr Githinji Gitahi commended the e-Learning graduates for their impressive performance.

Dr Gitahi said that the students had demonstrated the effectiveness of e-Learning in closing the gap of trained health workers in Africa.

Amref Health Africa has been training nurses using e-Learning for ten years now and students have been coming out with top results.

For Dr Gitahi, this success is a confirmation that e-Learning is a modern positive approach and he urged Africa to embrace the technology to accelerate achievement of universal health care.

“Learning has to go along with time, now technology has come to bridge the gap and it helps accelerate the universal in Africa. Technology is the enabler to the future”, he said. The technology is interactive and students have content with them everywhere they go, allowing them to work even as they learn.

Besides providing employment for youth and bridging the gap in the nursing workforce, the eLearning initiative is also aimed at reducing the maternal and child mortality rates in Zambia.

The infant mortality rate is just over 70 for every 1,000 live births while approximately 59,000 women die in child birth every year.

By training more health workers efficiently and effectively, more women and children can access life-saving health care.

The eLearning was implemented with the sole purpose of training more nurses to reduce the shortfall of nurses.

The shortage of the nursing personnel in Zambia is a thorny issue that has continued to keep government on its toes.

Currently, the eLearning programmes are being conducted only in nursing colleges managed by the ministry of health and is being conducted in phases starting with five nursing schools namely, Ndola, Kitwe, Mufulira, Livingstone and Chipata school of nursing as pilot sites.

Zambia is short of over 11, 000 nurses to meet the nurse-to-patient ratio.

Copperbelt permanent secretary Elias Kamanga says the e-Learning programme has proved effective.

"Let me point out that the nurses being trained using this programme are not different from those trained using traditional methods, those who have already established themselves and their high quality is still respected and because of the continued population growth and need for more nurses, the eLearning program will ensure that we increase the number," Mr Kamanga said.

When the programme was launched, the Ministry of Health handed over the 80 computers to various nursing schools and 10 computers to the General Nursing Council (GNC) to use for the programme.

The target is to train 6, 000 nurses under the programme in the next five years with each registered school of nursing enrolling not less than 50 students initially and eventually increasing the number they gain more experience.

The General Nursing Council has so far trained 16 principal tutors in curriculum adaptation, 30 tutors in content development, 20 tutors in medical editing, among others. Under the e-Learning programme, enrolled nurses and midwives receive a continuum of training, including diagnosis of diseases, care for newborn babies, management of labour and its complications, growth and development of a child and provision of adolescent-friendly services, among others.

This innovation in Africa is showing extraordinary development as evidenced from this training programme. PUBLISHED IN THE ZAMBIA DAILY MAIL ON SEPTEMBER 24, 2017. LINK: <https://www.daily-mail.co.zm/embracing-technology-for-more-health-workers/>

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