Healthcare at the click of a button

By Matthew Donen

23 May 2017

With patients in Africa having to wait in long queues, travel vast distances or wait weeks for a visit from a healthcare provider, e-health innovations have the potential to change the lives of millions of people on the continent.

123rf.com

However, it's not simply a case of copying e-health providers in developed countries where this model has worked well.

The unique circumstances such as having to travel from remote areas to access healthcare and distinctive African medical conditions faced on the continent are resulting in African companies, who understand these challenges best, leading the way in rapidly changing the continent.

A change in focus

A good example of innovation in healthcare is the recently-launched ConnectMed, an online medical service in Kenya which is taking e-health services to a new level. ConnectMed allows patients to access doctors via a video link (such as Skype) on their computers, tablets or smartphones and get prescriptions, sick-notes, and referrals. For patients without internet access, the company will be rolling out physical stations with computers in locations such as pharmacies and cyber cafés.

This service is a change from what has been available to date. Initially, due to limited smartphone penetration and internet connectivity, e- start-ups in Africa focused on healthcare booking platforms and integrated health solutions that refer patients to a network of doctors. This focus was the starting point of transforming Africa's healthcare industry into a more tech-friendly sector.

A common trend in Africa has been to follow the blueprint of companies in developed markets such as Babylon Health, a company in the UK that offers a digital healthcare app via an artificial intelligence (AI) powered chatbot. However, platforms working in developed markets don't know about African disease.

This has seen the launch of start-ups such as Kangpe Health, a mobile app started by a doctor in Nigeria, which provides a platform for patients to type in medical questions. Medical staff then provide answers to the respective questions or refer the customer to a doctor. Other start-ups such as MedAfrica in Kenya, and South Africa's Hello Doctor provide similar question and answer services on the continent.

Rise in investment

The continent's internet connectivity is fast catching up with that of its developed counterparts allowing for broader innovations like ConnectMed. Indicative of this was the finding in a recent report that seven of the 10 fastest growing internet populations are in Africa, allowing the region to leapfrog a generation and reshape economies on the continent. This growth has not gone unnoticed by investors, as indicated by the $366.8m record amount of investment raised by African start-ups during 2016.

Recent expansion into Africa by global giants such as Google, Facebook, IBM, Uber and Netflix, all of whom have extended new product offerings to African consumers is likely to result in increased internet access in the region. In order to reach the maximum benefit from their products, many of these companies are investing in African infrastructure in order to improve internet connectivity and create greater access to users on the continent.

With 40% of sub-Saharan Africa's population being under the age of 15, according to data from the World Bank, this generation is embracing the advances in technology making the African healthcare sector ripe for disruption.

As the continent's technology and smartphone penetration improve, healthcare in Africa – a service that remains largely inaccessible to many on the continent – is increasingly becoming a click of the button away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Donen is the senior private equity analyst at [[www.riscura.com RisCura]]