

Solving Africa's healthcare logistics problems with AI

Artificial Intelligence (AI), in the form of IBM Watson, is being used to aid decision making in public health supply chains in developing countries and improve patients' access to life-saving medicines.



Photo: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

"Today's AI technology offers the solution, allowing us to leverage cognitive capabilities to create a transparent, intelligent and predictive supply chain. We asked ourselves what could be achieved if we could get IBM Watson to place chatbots on the platforms available to health workers in African supply chains, so that people can improve their learning." An AI powered chatbot can deliver personalised learning on mobile devices to enhance the supply chain skills of the health workers that staff most African healthcare supply chains," says Deborah Dull, representing the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"What if, through the AI, health workers could know where specific products are in the country? If there is a stock out at their facility, they could ask Watson where stock is available. It almost always comes down to where the shipment is, despite all the advances in supply chain," she says.

Enabling patients

AI would enable patients, too, to know when and where to go to get their ARVs or TB medication.

"Areas where people are experiencing problems would be highlighted. Data collected would be used to train and maintain the Watson cognitive engine so that it continually generates the best responses to users' questions."

Pilot project

In Kenya, AI's potential to transform healthcare supply chains has become a reality in a pilot project with the Kenya Medical Supplies Agency (Kemsa). Watson is being rolled out to 7,000 facilities countrywide. Users can interact with the AI through various platforms, including SMS, computer and voice over mobile data.

A study of 400 supply chain leaders revealed that the greatest hurdle in achieving supply chain objectives is a lack of visibility and transparency. AI can provide this, by accessing more information than is humanly possible. It can minimise expiries; will enable the implementation of best practices and standards in supply chain management, and the achievement of supply chain objectives.”

Kemsa's vision in its IBM Watson roll out is to “have an AI trusted advisor to share insights on the causes of stock-outs, preventative measures and the identification of relevant resources to improve the availability of product by 50%”.

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