

Spotlight on Medical Laboratory Services in Nigeria



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How is healthcare delivered in Nigeria?

In Nigeria, healthcare service delivery is carried out in two major subsectors -- the public health service and private health service. There are three tiers of healthcare service delivery in Nigeria namely: Primary, Secondary and Tertiary healthcare service levels. Healthcare service delivery are constitutionally under

the concurrent legislation in Nigeria, that is, the Federal and state governments can make regulations and policy for the efficient and effective healthcare service delivery. Healthcare services are departmentalized according to the different professions that comprise the health sector (Medical Laboratory Services, Physiotherapy, Radiography/Radiology, Pharmacy, Nursing Services, Physicians etc.). In Nigeria, each profession is distinct and strictly under the purview of their respective regulatory agencies. In the discharge of their duties, all healthcare professionals work in synergy for the interest of patients.

How are laboratories organized within the healthcare delivery system? Are they integrated, separate, independent?

Medical laboratory services are central to the health care delivery system in Nigeria. They operate in either of the three modes stated in the previous section. In the public health institutions, laboratories are a part of the core clinical services. In the private sector, they operate independently, owned by qualified individual persons (proprietors). Recently, following the wave of private-public partnership (PPP) some vested interests in government are pushing for policy statements that encourage the takeover of public laboratories by private conglomerates within public hospitals.

What are the education requirements for the Biomedical Laboratory Scientists?

The basic educational requirement and minimum standard and skill to be attained by persons seeking to practice as a Medical Laboratory Scientist in Nigeria is the completion of a Bachelor of Medical Laboratory Science (BMLS) degree obtained through a five-year course in an accredited university. The BMLS degree is a prerequisite for registration and issuance of a practicing license from the Medical Laboratory Science Council of Nigeria (MLSCN). MLSCN regulates medical laboratory science practice in Nigeria. After obtaining these basic educational and professional requirements, one is mandated to increase one's scientific knowledge and expertise annually, by participating in compulsory continuous professional development (CPD) programs, scientific conferences and workshops organized across the country and elsewhere across the globe. These are conditions for renewing one's practicing license. However, there is a new curriculum pending approval by Nigeria Universities Commission (NUC) for Medical Laboratory Science departments in Nigeria Universities. It is aimed at upgrading the departments to faculties. And it entails the commencement of a six-year program leading to the award of the Doctor of Medical Laboratory Science (MLSD) which will over time replace the BMLS degree. Presently, only two universities are piloting (test-running) the Faculty structure in the country.



A private MLS practitioner operating a hematology analyzer

What title is used for Biomedical Laboratory Scientists?

In Nigeria, Medical Laboratory Scientists are simply called *Scientists*, *Laboratory Scientists*, or *Medical Laboratory Scientists*. All are under the designation of **MLS** an acronym for Medical Laboratory Scientist.



MLS practitioners working in the molecular laboratory at the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Enugu, Nigeria

What are the strengths of the health care delivery system?

Nigeria's health care system is very poorly ranked. The various tiers and service components are operating below standard in line with international best practices. For instance, while other African countries like South Africa have more than three hundred ISO-accredited laboratories and hospitals, Nigeria is struggling with barely six such laboratories with a meagre two hospitals (one private and military) meeting the standards. This means that health care service delivery in Nigeria is relatively substandard. There is also a disproportionate patient to healthcare personnel ratio. And that is why medical tourism is a trending phenomenon among the elites and Nigeria government officials.

What are the challenges facing the healthcare delivery system?

There are myriad of challenges facing the health care delivery system in Nigeria. These range from poor infrastructure to poor personnel development. Government has over the years neglected the system and it has continued to decay. This accounts for an increased mortality rate; with its attendant shortened life expectancy rate.

Prior to 2000, life expectancy of Nigerians was 80 (± 5) years for females and 70 (± 5) years for males. But today we sorely face the decline of these indices to 50 (± 5) for both genders. Worse still, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) released a heart-rending figure on Nigeria's life expectancy in 2019. It placed Nigeria as a country with the world's third lowest life expectancy rate of 55 years. This means Nigeria is only better than countries like Sierra Leone, Chad and the Central African Republic. All these indices explain the sorry state of Nigeria's health sector.

More so, the unhealthy antagonism between physicians and other healthcare professionals over undue role usurpation especially in specialties like laboratories between pathologists and MLS is another obstacle that contributes to the challenges bedeviling the health sector in Nigeria.

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