

Exclusive Interview with Dr. Funmi Adewara



Q1: COULD YOU KINDLY PROVIDE US WITH AN OVERVIEW OF YOUR BACKGROUND?

My name is Dr Funmi Rebecca Adewara, a UK based Physician and Cambridge trained Bioscience Entrepreneur of Nigerian heritage with a background in Medicine, Pharmaceutical and Business Development. I am the Founder/CEO of multi-award winning pioneer integrated telehealth Start-up company called- Mobihealth International, registered in the UK, US & Nigeria with a Pan-African focus.

My late father was from Kwara, my mother is from Kogi State but I was born in Kaduna State where we lived during my childhood. I did my primary school in Kaduna and secondary education in Abuja, both in public schools. Upon the completion of my Senior Secondary School at coveted Girls' Science Secondary School Kuje, Abuja, armed with distinctions, I proceeded to the University of Ibadan, Nigeria to study medicine, graduating top 1% in my class. Later, I proceeded to the prestigious University of Cambridge, where I obtained a Master of Philosophy in Bioscience Enterprise with practical skills in bioscience entrepreneurship and leadership.

Q2: MA, WE ARE PARTICULARLY CURIOUS ABOUT YOUR MEDICAL SCHOOL YEARS. WE UNDERSTAND YOU SERVED AS TREASURER FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN MEDICAL STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION. WHAT ROLE, IF ANY, DID THIS PUBLIC SERVICE PLAY IN SHAPING THE WOMAN YOU ARE TODAY.

Indeed the foundation for my entrepreneurial spirit and passion for social impact was built from multiple experiences throughout my formative years. I held leadership positions from primary to secondary and my university years. Importantly, the foundation for excellence and integrity was laid by the influence of my mother who single

handedly raised five of us with her meagre salary supplemented by her side hustle whilst working as a healthcare worker at the Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital, ABUTH Kaduna and I took after her entrepreneurial spirit and hard work. I was a member of Girls' SCOUT in primary school and was in choir at secondary school. I played sports (volleyball, track and field) and was often elected class monitor because of my academic strength and leadership qualities which endeared me to my teachers. The University of Ibadan played a pivotal role in the woman I am today. I was the only elected official in my set during to some aberrations that saw my year group edged out by the year group above and below us. That year, our juniors were allowed to compete for the President of the University of Ibadan Medical Students' Association and other elective positions by the outgoing final year students and with their combined numbers effectively voted against my year group thereby denying us Executive positions that year. I emerged winner for the position of treasurer which was unopposed of all the positions. I wanted to pull out but my class mates encouraged me to proceed. It was a big learning experience for me. Thankfully I was able to work harmoniously with the other members of the executive committee successfully. As the Treasurer of the single largest medical student body and Chairperson of the fund raising committee, the responsibility of ensuring accountability, meticulous management of resources and our finances rested largely on me working closely with other executives and members of the Association in the execution of projects including rural healthcare outreach programs, symposium and other landmark events. My character was been tested and built.

In the same vein, I was elected the Vice Chairperson of the Action Group on Adolescent Health, a reproductive and Youth

Advocacy group pioneered at University of Ibadan which had the Past Minister for Health, Professor Adewole as its patron. The experiences and skills I acquired during this period undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping me into the woman I am today.

During the induction ceremony I was honoured with the Prof. Akinkugbe U.I College of Medicine Alumni Leadership Award for my graduating class for my “outstanding leadership and impeccable character”. It was quite humbling. I was also the runner-up for the Provost Award.

During my Youth Service I was elected the Chief Medical Director for Batch B NYSC camp charged with setting up, equipping and running the camp clinic that catered for three hundred corp members. I provided strategic leadership to the medical team and it was adjudged the best in the history of the camp.

So, you can see that the skills you acquire during your extracurricular activities are not in vain. They are transferable skills that if well utilized will pay great dividends in the future. My pursuit of an innovative, scalable solution that can address our healthcare system challenges led me to found Mobihealth which is now going to impact millions of lives across the globe.

Q3: HOW WOULD YOU ENCOURAGE MEDICAL STUDENTS WITH THE “MEDICINE OR NOTHING” MINDSET TO DIVERSIFY THEIR INTERESTS BEYOND THE CLINICAL WORLD?

Career changes are becoming common among professionals in recent years, but many physicians still think pursuing a career outside of clinical practice would make them not achieve their professional goals. Doctors have the training and education to contribute to society in many beneficial ways in addition to traditional clinical practice. One can be a Physician Entrepreneur, and contribute on a larger scale to humanity.

Recent advances in healthcare technology, medical science, and patient education require physicians to play new roles that have not traditionally been well-defined. Doctors can innovate and have a long-term productive impact on healthcare and throughout the world if they learn to seize the non-traditional career opportunities available to physicians. It is good for doctors to leverage their other talents and skills and pursue their passion beyond their scope of brick and mortar practices. The universe awaits you unleashing your God given talent to help shape the present and the future.

Q4: MA, WHAT TOP NON-MEDICAL RELATED SKILLS DO YOU THINK WILL SHAPE THE WORLD IN THE NEXT DECADE AND WHICH SHOULD MEDICAL STUDENTS PARTICULARLY ENDEAVOUR TO DEVELOP?

The world is accelerating towards the fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), blurring the boundaries between the physical, digital and biological worlds. This compels us to consider the necessity of structural shifts in our relationship with the environment and how we conduct ourselves as a global community.

The next decade will find us relying on the 21st-century technologies—artificial intelligence, the internet of things, social media, digital learning platforms, augmented and virtual reality, drones, 3D printing and so much more—to keep us healthy and to transform economies. Communication skills, IT skills, Analytical/Innovative skills are important skills that anyone in the medical field and in EVERY other field will need to succeed and create value in this world. It will be critical for survival in the highly competitive world.

Q5: THE HEALTH SECTOR IS NOT IN THE MOST PRISTINE STATE AND THE VAST MAJORITY OF NEWLY INDUCTED DOCTORS WANT TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY. ARE THERE OPPORTUNITIES IN NIGERIA THAT MEDICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES ARE MISSING OUT ON OR IS THE GRASS TRULY GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE?

It is unfortunate that Africa continues to lose her brightest minds to the western world. Health sector is one that has been massively affected by brain drain with over 70% of our medical work force leaving the continent yearly to pursue their post graduate training and establish better lives for themselves and families. It was and is still the dream of many medical students and fresh graduates to leave the continent as soon as they graduated or at earliest opportunity. Factors such as poor remuneration, lack of quality infrastructure and equipment to support their training and practice contributes significantly to the exodus from Nigeria. The critical shortage of doctors and healthcare workers contributes significantly to high mortality rates. What it takes to fix all that is wrong may take decades to accomplish, however, technology presents an immediate opportunity to harness this global diaspora of medics to provide some immediate relief, bridge the supply gap and help Nigeria and Africa leapfrog her healthcare challenges.

Nigeria is a big market with room to innovate solutions that speak to many challenges we face. I believe opportunities abound here also for doctors who are outside the box thinkers to contribute to societal development and prosper despite the challenges. Where there is a will there is a way!

Q6: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO HAVE YOUR MASTERS PROGRAMME IN BIOSCIENCES, A PROGRAMME THAT IS SEEMINGLY NOT A COMMONLY TRAVELLED ROUTE BY NIGERIAN MEDICAL GRADUATES?

My passion for innovation drove me to study MPhil in Bioscience Enterprise at Cambridge University. Most of my col-

leagues and in deed it was a reigning thing, pursued their Masters degree in Public Health. I wanted more. I wanted to acquired knowledge and skills that were in line with my inquisitive innovative mind-set. I did my research and with some divine leading chose that course. The modules were a perfect match for what I wanted to do so I applied and got a space. It was a miracle that I was offered admission with a home student fee option. The knowledge and skills I acquired spring boarded me into the medical entrepreneurship space and has been quite instrumental in building Mobihealth.

According to the Cambridge University, The MPhil in Bioscience Enterprise (MBE) programme is an intensive taught science and business course intended for those who have an interest in enterprise and the ambition to found technology companies or take up leadership, executive or consultancy roles in the life sciences sector. The course is designed to help Students gain an understanding of the following:

Life sciences, including how contemporary biological and medical research leads to exploitable science and commercial products;

Business, including commercial and analytical skills required in biotechnology and healthcare-related businesses; Elements of management, including for example research and development in a commercial environment, client skills and interaction, and financing;

Technology transfer, from academia to industry and from industry to industry;

law and intellectual property frameworks, relating to companies and individuals; providing knowledge of the ethical, legal and regulatory issues associated with bringing scientific advances to market; and

Social and ethical issues, including fundamental constraints when applying scientific research to the development of new bioscience products;

Global biotechnology trends, which may include for example contrasts and comparisons between different markets.

Q7: THE IDEA BEHIND CREATING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS LIKE MOBIHEALTH USUALLY IS NOT JUST DOWN TO AN ‘EUREKA!’ MOMENT. MA, COULD YOU LET US KNOW HOW THE IDEA FOR MOBIHEALTH EVOLVED?

Around the world, unequal access to health care is contributing to premature deaths from preventable diseases. According to the WHO, every 2mins a child in SSA dies from complications of Malaria. The continent accounts for 2/3rd of maternal morbidity and mortality rates in the world. I could have been one of those statistics at the age of 10 when I was gravely ill. I was rushed to a hospital with my life on the line- an experience I will never forget. My exposure to the plight of people at a young age, during my medical school and early post graduate years drives my passion to finding a solution to the sufferings of people across many

African countries. The lack of facilities, long distance travel, shortage of hospital beds and doctors, counterfeit medicines and high cost of treatment are barriers that technology can effectively help to tackle. My experiences and desire for change fuelled my passion to contribute to finding an innovative, sustainable and scalable solution that can change the poor narrative in Nigeria, Africa and under-serve communities around the world. A world where everyone has access to quality health care as a fundamental human right. I came to realize that most deaths recorded could have been avoided if individuals have timely access to expert medical advice, and genuine drugs. I am delighted that Mobihealth is now positioned to bridging this gap especially targeting primary healthcare where 70% of medical problems could be solved.

Q8: BEYOND THE CLINICAL ASPECT, MOBIHEALTH CERTAINLY RELIES HEAVILY ON TECHNOLOGY. MA, WE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW WHAT THE TECH WORLD IN NIGERIA IS LIKE FOR A FEMALE. IS IT TRULY AS MALE DOMINATED AS IT SEEMS? AND IF YES, HOW CAN MORE OPPORTUNITIES BE CREATED FOR WOMEN IN THE TECH WORLD?

Nigeria finds itself in a unique position; the country’s ICT (information and communication technologies) sector has grown significantly since the early 2000s. Unfortunately, there is gender inequality in Nigeria’s tech industry and in many other countries around the globe.

According to the Women’s Technology Empowerment Center, Nigeria has a sizable gender gap. The technology sector, in particular, does not employ many women. “According to the National Bureau of Statistics, women make up on average just 22% of the total number of engineering and technology university graduates each year.” Similarly, a fifth of the people working in the information and technology sector are women. Thankfully, some women, including Abisoye Ajayi-Akinfolarin, have taken it upon themselves to solve gender inequality in Nigeria’s tech industry.

Difficulty in raising funding is one of the biggest hurdles female entrepreneurs face in Nigeria. It’s six times harder to secure funds than it is for our male counterparts due to cultural and societal barrier that limit a woman to access financial capital. A lot of work still needs to be done in addressing it.

It is in the best interest of society and global good for more girls/women to venture into STEM-related careers. They can contribute trillions of dollars to the economies and deliver better Return on Investment.

It is therefore imperative that we change the narrative and influence how young girls see technology and their role or relationship with it based on societal position.

Q9: WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF TELEMEDICINE IN NIGERIA, MA?

Telemedicine certainly has huge prospect in Nigeria and other African countries where the impact can be felt the greatest. One of the silver lining of the COVID19 pandemic is that it has catalysed the adoption of telemedicine and throated it to the fore front of global health solutions and rightly so. Social distancing and lock down measures have further limited access to care and delay in diagnosis and management increasing disease burden and cost of care.

Telemedicine presents unique opportunity for Africa to leap from her healthcare challenges presenting a sustainable solution that can address critical shortage of doctors, brain drain and high cost of treatment amongst other things.

As with any new technology or innovation a lot of awareness still needs to be created to ensure adoption to the last mile. In more advanced countries like the US, Europe we have seen how the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of telemedicine today by over 500%-1000% globally.

With the COVID-19 pandemic having already set the stage for a massive increase in telehealth consults, there seems to be an even bigger future – as demand for one-stop virtual visits and remote patient monitoring grows. People are warming up to this new innovation.

Even though telemedicine is part of the MDCN curriculum, there are still no guidelines, or regulations to guide activities on use of the telemedicine in Nigeria. In other jurisdictions like the USA HIPAA and GDPR compliance are import-

ant regulatory requirement for providers. Ensuring proper licensing and appraisal of telehealth. This vacuum leaves room for agitations and reluctance on the use both on demand and supply side.

We have engaged proactively with relevant stake holders to bring policy formulation to the front burner. The government has critical role to play. It is the responsibility of the government to create incentives, digital infrastructure and help drive innovative frontier solutions to the last mile. Telemedicine is still new in Nigeria and a lot still needs to be done to increase awareness on the benefits to all stakeholders with closely through PPP with private firms.

Q10: DOCTOR. CEO. UNIVERSAL HEALTHCARE ADVOCATE. YOU DO IT ALL MA! ARE THERE ANY PERSONAL SKILLS/ HOBBIES YOU DO FOR YOUR OWN ENTERTAINMENT?

To be honest it is a huge responsibility and big sacrifices have been made to get here. The entrepreneurial journey is filled with highs and lows, setbacks and successes. Birthing Mobihealth is like a woman in labour, the end justifies the means. My favourite past time is time spent with my twin children. I enjoy movies and music, reading and cooking. I love travelling and exploring new places.

Q11: FOR THE MEDICAL TRAINEES READING THIS INTERVIEW, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY TO THEM DIRECTLY, MA?

Be yourself! Pursue your passion with integrity and clarity of purpose.