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## Harmony in health sector: a requirement for effective healthcare delivery in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Harmony is defined as the pleasing combination of elements of a system to form an all-inclusive, all involving and more productive team. The aim of this present review was to investigate the factors militating against harmony among healthcare professional in the Nigerian healthcare delivery system. This review was carried out by searching through literature on the topic that bother on harmony among health professions in the health sector. Literature search and reports from previous studies indicates that harmony among health workers is pivotal to improving the health indices. However, available evidence suggests that unlike in the developed world, health care professionals do not collaborate well together in Nigeria because of the claim of superiority of a particular health professional over others. This has often resulted in inter-professional conflict which is threatening to tear the health sector apart to the detriment of the patients. The Nigeria health system should be based on team work. Health professionals from a variety of disciplines should work together to deliver the best possible healthcare services to all Nigerians. All members of the team are equally valuable and essential to the smooth running of hospitals. Hospitals should ideally be headed by health administrators or by a qualified member of any of the professions in the health sector.

### 1. Introduction

Nigeria, known as “the Giant of Africa”, is the most populous country in Africa and the seventh most populous country in the world with about 160 million people and more than 250 ethnic groups<sup>[1]</sup>. The rating by the United Nations Human Poverty Index in 1999 revealed that Nigeria has been ranked among the poorest nations in the world. Per capita income is estimated at 692 USD, with an estimated two-thirds of the population living in poverty. Although the recurrent expenditure on health has risen over the years, healthcare delivery remains suboptimal<sup>[2]</sup>. This is traceable to several factors: lack of professional harmony and team work among professionals in the health sector, gross underfunding and shortage of skilled medical personnel<sup>[3,4]</sup>. It is besieged by incessant industrial actions by professionals in the health

sector. There is lack of political will as well as bureaucratic bottlenecks in public health care delivery in Nigeria. There is gross marginalization and poor sense of belonging by many health professionals in the health sector<sup>[5]</sup>. Despite government spending on the sector, the deplorable condition of the health sector in Nigeria raises serious concerns about the management of the health sector. Professional conflict in the health sector is a serious cankerworm that is killing the system. The lack of team spirit and claim of superiority of a particular health professional over others has had a negative impact on team spirit and health care delivery in Nigeria<sup>[6]</sup>.

The term harmony means agreement in feeling, opinion or accord. It is a pleasing combination of elements of a system to form an all-inclusive, all involving and more productive team. Health professionals work together every day. Harmony among health workers will go a long way in improving the health indices. However, there is more to working together. We must make sure that the work of one profession complements with that of the other. Coordination, collaboration and cooperation are needed among health professionals<sup>[7]</sup>. Working together means acknowledging that all participants bring equally valid knowledge and expertise

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from their professional and personal experience required to enable the offering of the best possible healthcare service to our customer (patient). Best practices in the developed world requires that health professionals within the health sector work together as part of a multi-disciplinary/multi-professional team<sup>[7]</sup>. Health professionals include: medical laboratory scientist, medical doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, pharmacists, radiographers, *etc.* These health professionals all play different roles and are specialized in various aspects of medicine. Patient care is a complex activity and demands that health and social care professionals work together in an effective manner. Inter-professional education offers a possible way to improve collaboration and patient care<sup>[8]</sup>. However, contrary to best practices in the developed economies, available evidence suggests that these professionals do not collaborate well together in Nigeria because of the claim of superiority of a particular health professional over others. This has often resulted in professional conflict which is threatening to tear the health sector apart and lead to the detriment of the patients.

The Nigeria health system should be based on team work. Health professionals from a variety of disciplines should work together to deliver the best healthcare services to their patients. All members of the team are equally valuable and essential to the smooth running of hospitals. Health professionals should ideally work in multidisciplinary teams to provide the best care for patients in different treatment situations. Team working means taking responsibility for your own work as well as respecting the contributions of all your other colleagues in other health professions. Only good communication is essential for effective team working. All members of the health team are equally important. The current boss/servant relationship in the Nigeria health system where only a member of the health team can be appointed a chief medical director (CMD) or head of a laboratory department is deplorable and is partly responsible for the decay in the system. It is responsible for low morale and productivity in the Nigerian health care system. Most other health professionals do not feel a sense of belonging despite being an important member of the health team. This bad practice will have to stop if the Nigerian health system must move forward like it is in other developed countries in the world. Offering of care for the sick involves over 30 regulated health professionals, such as medical laboratory scientists, physicians, nurses, social workers, pharmacists, dieticians, physiotherapists and other healthcare practitioners. There is an urgent need to adapt an inter-professional culture in healthcare delivery in Nigeria<sup>[9,10]</sup>. Effective teamwork should involve health professionals in the health sector working together in the day-to-day management of patients ensuring that our patients get the best healthcare services<sup>[11]</sup>. Harmony among the professionals in the health sector in Nigeria will only be achieved by bringing together all professionals that make up the health and social care system to accelerate

innovation and best practices. It is becoming increasingly clear that the only thing that can bring real benefits to patients in Nigeria is that all health professionals in the health sector work as genuine partners and have mutual respect for each other.

Team working has an important contribution to the effective delivery of healthcare. A key component of team working involves the removal of bureaucratic hierarchical ways of working and replacing them with flexible team working among members of different health professionals centred on networking and collaboration. Team working involves interaction with each other to achieve these shared objectives. One of the advantages of team working is that it facilitates multi-disciplinary teams and involves a number of health professionals with a diverse range of experience working together to produce higher levels of innovation in patient care. We recommend the implementation of one of 2 models as solution to the lingering crisis in the health sector in Nigeria.

Firstly, it does not make economic and supply sense for health professionals to head hospitals. They ideally should have no business running hospitals. There are suboptimal numbers of health professionals to manage the healthcare-related needs of Nigerians. It is not best practice for health professionals to dabble into the responsibilities of health administrators at the expense of their professional responsibilities to their patients. Best practice in the developed world advocates that qualified health administrators should run hospitals and manage healthcare delivery with health professionals playing an advisory role as members of the Medical Advisory Committee.

Secondly, if the previous option is not good enough, we advocate that headship of hospitals should be based on the principle of “He who the cap fits, let him wear it”. Any health professional who has taken time out to develop themselves and have become role models in their chosen profession and who meet the minimum requirement (education and experience) and has the requisite management qualification irrespective of the professional affiliations can be appointed as CMD. The days where becoming the CMD of a teaching hospital or the medical director of a federal medical centre is the golden right of members of only one health professional group will have to stop if harmony and team work must return to the health sector.

## **2. Professional harmony between laboratory scientist and pathologist in Nigeria**

Medical laboratory scientists or biomedical scientist work in healthcare to diagnose disease and evaluate the effectiveness of treatment through the analysis of body fluids and tissue samples from patients. They provide the “engine room” of modern medicine with 70% of diagnoses based on the laboratory results provided by medical laboratory

scientists[12].

Medical laboratory scientists are at the heart of the medical team providing other professionals with vital scientific information that allows them to make medical judgments needed for the effective management of the patient medical condition. When a major incident occurs, it is the medical laboratory scientists should ensure the right amount of blood reaches the right patient at the right time. They measure vital blood chemicals to monitor patient conditions and detect signs of internal bleeding; they determine coagulation analysis to determine patients prone to thrombosis and will require anticoagulation; they screen blood and blood products intended for transfusion to patients to prevent the risk of transfusion transmissible infections; they carry out blood cultures to determine patients with septicemia and require antibiotics treatment and determine the specific antibiotics that is required to treat infective processes in patients. They study biopsies to determine if patients have cancers or are predisposed to cancers.

Without the important and lifesaving services provided by medical laboratory scientist, accident and emergency wards would shut down; blood transfusion services would be unavailable; there would be inadequate management of hospital associated infections; coagulation clinics to provide thrombosis patients with anticoagulation would shut and premature babies would struggle to survive without their useful support. Whenever you have a sample taken from you by a doctor or nurse, it is usually analyzed by a medical laboratory scientist. Quite simply, without the services and support of these oracles of modern medicine, doctors would frequently be unable to diagnose diseases properly or treat their patients effectively. Medical laboratory science practice in Nigeria is regulated by the Medical Laboratory Science Council of Nigeria. Registration with the Medical Laboratory Science Council of Nigeria requires completion of an academic degree in medical laboratory science plus a period of training in any of the government approved laboratories to develop their practical skills and ensure their competence. This is to allow for the protection of the vulnerable public and for patient safety. This may occur as part of an integrated degree (laboratory attachment) or may be completed post-graduation (internship). The trainee's progress and competence is recorded and assessed on completion of training. Trainees whose training meets the requirement of regulatory institute or council are issued with a license to practice as a medical laboratory scientist.

Success in modern healthcare delivery worldwide depends on the accuracy and efficiency of diagnostic service rendered by biomedical scientists. Patients' lives and treatment delivered depend on the useful skills and knowledge of medical laboratory scientist. They carry out a range of laboratory and scientific laboratory tests that play a pivotal role in the diagnosis and treatment of diseases. Their useful service is key to the effective functioning of many clinical departments including the accident and emergency

departments. They play a key role in the diagnosis of diseases such as anaemia, diabetes, malignancies, emergency blood transfusions services, meningitis, hepatitis, chronic liver disease, chronic kidney disease, haematological malignancies, haemoglobinopathies, coagulation disorders, HIV and AIDS. They use computer- based laboratory information management system and other highly sophisticated automated equipment, employing a wide range of complex modern scientific techniques to carry out a varied, highly practical and analytical test on blood, body fluids and other biological materials including tissue samples in a bid to ensure an excellent laboratory service delivery. Areas of specialties in biomedical science include haematology, blood transfusion science, medical microbiology, virology, clinical biochemistry and immunology.

Good professional practice outlines how professionals in the health sector can provide the highest quality of service to their patients as well as leave up to their responsibilities to their professional colleagues and other healthcare professionals in the health sector. All health professionals in the health sector are an important part of the medical family. Several health professionals work as a team to provide patients with the best possible medical service. Good professional practice principles requires that regulatory professional bodies provide information on additional professional and specific guidance required to enable health professionals abide by the legal and statutory requirements regulating the profession. Every professional in the health sector in Nigeria should have a code of conduct or the ethical framework within which they should practice. This code of conduct should include: professional competence; personal conduct; professional relationships with other healthcare colleagues and public duties like confidentiality, honesty, diligence, integrity.

Health professionals are expected to exercise their professional knowledge and skill with judgement and care for the benefit of the vulnerable wider general public and in the best interests of the users of the service. They are expected to recognize the beliefs and values of the wider general public, the users of the service and professional colleagues, treating them on a fair and equitable basis. There are a variety of skilled and educated laboratory professionals who you may never encounter as a patient. However, these individuals play a very important role in diagnostic service delivery. People working in the diagnostic laboratory are responsible for conducting laboratory tests that provide crucial live saving information to the clinician. Apart from detecting the presence of infective agents, they are also involved in disease monitoring, research and public health. These skilled professionals use specialized equipment and techniques to analyze patients' samples, such as blood, urine, body fluids and tissue, and stool. They may be working in the hospital, clinic or a reference laboratory. Professionals involved in laboratory science practice include medical laboratory scientist, laboratory technicians and laboratory attendants. Biomedical scientists work and supervise a complex mix

of professional staff groups who interact and work together in delivering clinical laboratory services. They include scientific, technical and support staff (laboratory technicians, attendants, phlebotomy staff, secretarial and administrative staff).

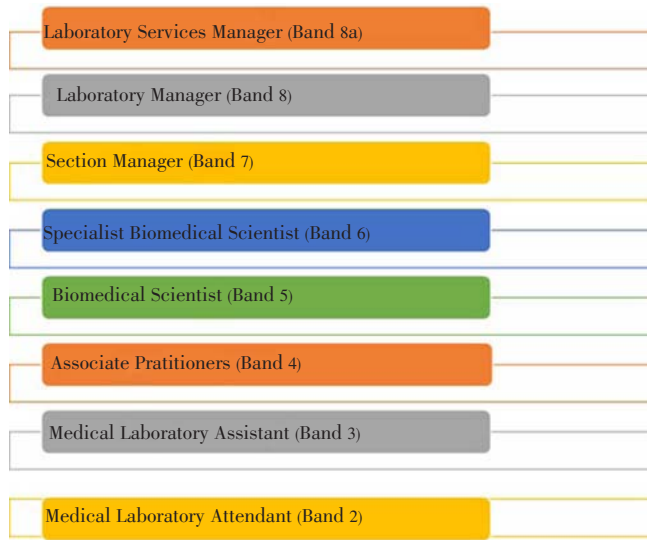


Figure 1. Organogram for biomedical scientist in the United Kingdom.

The medical laboratory science profession, a profession considered a cornerstone in effective healthcare delivery is regulated by the Institute of Biomedical Science in the case of the UK and the Medical Laboratory Science Council of Nigeria<sup>[13]</sup>. In most developed countries the diagnostic laboratory is headed by the laboratory manager an equivalent of an assistant director of medical laboratory services or the chief medical laboratory scientist in the Nigerian system. The laboratory manager is in charge of day to day running of the laboratory (budgeting, planning inventory control, personnel management and training). These cadres of laboratory staff manage other subordinate staff in the laboratory (laboratory scientist, laboratory technicians, attendants, trainees, phlebotomy staff and secretarial staff). They manage the laboratory revolving funds and ensure an uninterrupted delivery of a continually improving quality diagnostic service that meet the needs of the laboratory customers. Other categories of autonomous professional group that work in the laboratory are pathologist. They are clinicians whose training is regulated by Royal College of Pathologist as in the UK or the Medical and Dental Council in Nigeria. This cadre of laboratory professions have a parallel organogram. Organograms for medical laboratory scientist and pathologist in the United Kingdom and Nigeria is shown in Figures 1–4. Pathologist are responsible for managing patients with conditions in the area of specialty using results generated by laboratory scientist, running their specialty-based clinics, training of their residents as well as talking consult from their medical colleagues and managing their clinical laboratory budget. However, there has been a widespread breakdown in working relationships between laboratory scientists and pathologist in Nigeria because of the failure of some group to appreciate the fact that both professionals are autonomous,

have parallel organogram, regulated by different professional bodies and have clearly defined non-conflicting roles even though they work as a team to ensure that patients receive the best possible diagnostic services and care.

The conflict concerning headship of laboratory department in Nigeria will be a thing of the past if the director, deputy director or assistant director of medical laboratory services heads and manages members of his or her team (laboratory scientist, technicians and attendants) while the pathologist manages his team (residents and house doctors). We propose one of 2 models which we think will provide solution to the lingering problem between medical laboratory scientist and pathologist in Nigeria.

Firstly, the 2 professional groups can run their parallel organograms and manage their different budgets as well as run their parallel revolving funds as it obtains in developed countries. Heads of both professional groups (director, or assistant director of laboratory services) can manage the diagnostic side of the laboratory, train and manage their subordinate staffs (laboratory scientist, technicians and assistants) while the pathologist can run their clinics, train their residents and take consults from their medical colleagues. However the heads of both the clinical and diagnostic side can meet at annual general meeting to brainstorm on ways to improve the laboratory service delivered to patients.

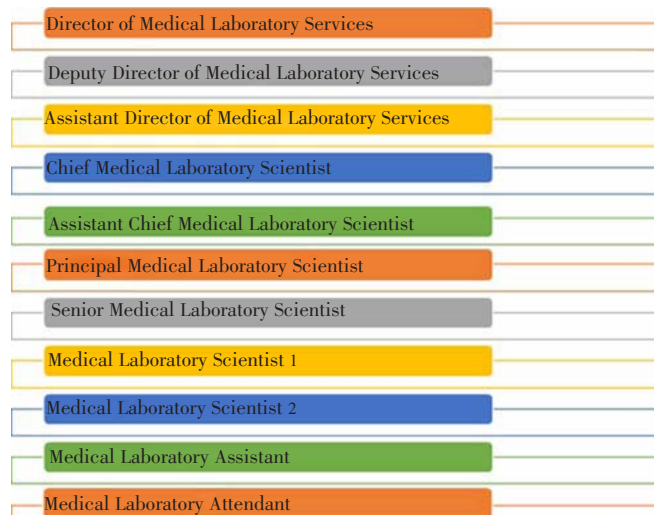


Figure 2. Organogram for medical laboratory scientist in Nigeria.



Figure 3. Organogram for pathologist in the United Kingdom.



**Figure 4.** Organogram for pathologist in Nigeria.

Secondly, we advocate that hardship should be tenured and rotatory among the two professional groups (laboratory scientist and pathologist). We recommend that the minimum requirement for becoming heads of laboratory department should be set for both professional groups and that any member of both professions who have the minimum requisite qualification can be appointed as head of department. When a laboratory scientist is head, he or she can seek the advice of the pathologist to allow for an informed decision on issues that border on the clinical side of the service while the pathologist as a head of department can seek the professional advice of the laboratory scientist on issues that border on diagnostic side as well as staff-related issues involving health professionals regulated by the Medical Laboratory Science Council of Nigeria (laboratory scientist, technicians and attendants).

### 3. Conclusion

Evidence-based best practices in the developed world advocates that health professionals should ideally work in multidisciplinary teams to provide the best healthcare for their patients. The Nigeria health system should be based on team work. Health professionals from a variety of disciplines should work together to deliver the best healthcare services to all Nigerians. All members of the team are equally valuable and essential to the smooth running of hospitals. Hospitals should ideally be headed by health administrators or by a qualified member of any of the professions in the health sector.

### Conflict of interest statement

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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