

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

PATIENTS, MEDICS *banked* ON EQUITY DURING PANDEMIC

Equity came in handy when there was national and global shortage of PPE
-Dr Nelson Kilimo

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Containing transmission of Covid-19 when an outbreak was reported in Kenya last year was uncertain. Even medics feared contracting the virus.

The government was also thrown into confusion when the surge hit a second wave in June, 2020.

The border town of Busia was in sharp focus, owing to wide spread of the virus attributed to traffic snarl-ups of trucks and drivers stuck there, but mingling with locals.

Any positive Covid case only heightened fear among medics. There were inadequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

This dire situation attracted stakeholders like Equity Bank through the Kenya Covid-19 Fund Board and Equity Group Foundation. It embarked on supporting front-line health workers in public hospitals with PPE besides establishing a psycho-social support and mental wellness programme in Busia.

Among the beneficiaries was the Alupe Hospital, a leading Covid-19 isolation centre where Nelson Kilimo, the medical superintendent, recalls that medics feared attending to critically ill patients for fear of contracting the virus.

"This was the scenario that left health workers in the balance," he says, adding that though the hospital received back-up staff, the medics "were reluctant to work in the isolation centre and there were other restrictions, especially with age and lactating mothers."

The situation was to spiral, as patients rose from four in April to 165 by June against its bed capacity of 120.

It was then that Chief Commercial Officer of Equity Bank, Polycarp Igathe, donated a consignment of gumboots, gloves, face masks and sprayers for fumigation, among other medical items.

"Equity came in handy, at a time we were desperately waiting for county government to supply us with PPEs, but there was national and global shortage. Those that were also circulating in the market were substandard," recalls Dr Kilimo, adding: "We have not reported a burden of PPE shortages, even the sup-

ply continues as the virus continues to ravage the country."

Another initial challenge was a high rate of absenteeism due to infections among staffers, but which is now a thing of the past. Alupe has 64 staffers with 46 as health professionals and 18 support staff, who are all supplied with standard PPE by the Equity Group Foundation, and which "went along to guarantee the fight against Covid-19, took away stress of procuring PPE. This is a noble activity that various organisations should join," says Kilimo.

GLOVES, GUMBOOTS, FACE MASKS

The hospitals had admitted more than 900 patients, 765 of which tested Covid-19 positive.

Kilimo said: "PPE are a necessity for effective care of a patient and protect a health worker, who is at the front-line of containing the disease."

The support by Equity Group Foundation has also boosted service delivery at King Fahad General Hospital, Mpeketoni Sub-county Hospital and Faza Sub-county Hospital in Lamu County.

Suleiman Maganga, the Equity Branch manager in Lamu, said the hospitals were supplied with PPE, gloves, masks, gumboots and face shields.

Alfred Obengo, the Nation Nurses Association of Kenya president, has been a technical advisor to the Equity Group Foundation on PPE.

"Quality PPE are critical in the fight against the virus. If medics don't protect themselves, they'll be super spreaders at hospitals," he said. "We, therefore, advise that it is better not to wear a face-mask than to wear a substandard one."

With both national and global shortage of PPE, Equity Foundation embarked on empowerment and capacity building of local manufacturers through training by foreign experts. The end result was PPE "that were of high standards," says Mr Obengo.

The technical team advised that a 24-hour call centre be put up to assist any medic in any of Kenya's 47 counties, because "people assume healthcare workers are immune to stress, but they are human. Working within isolation centres, managing critically ill patients, having some die can be draining."

The training also achieved case management and infectious control meas-



An ICU manager in protective gear at Kenyatta University Teaching, Referral & Research Hospital. Equity Group Foundation donated PPE to medics. [David Gichuru, Standard]



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ures, which mitigated fear, as medics were taking off at any suspected Covid cases when the pandemic started. "But now they have confidence in fighting the virus," says Obengo, also a member of the Covid-19 Fund established by President Uhuru Kenyatta.

DRAINING TO LOSE MEDICS

Louis Litswa, another technical team member representing the anesthesia and critical care physicians, was mandated to deal with quality and standards of PPE, education and advocacy on infrastructure and equipment such as the oxygen ecosystem.

Dr Litswa says most firms were submitting imported PPE, which did not meet specifications, or worse, had long lead time of deliveries in excess of four weeks.

Equity Foundation's procuring of the PPE helped reduce the costs considerably and quality went up after training, working with teams from the Kenya Association of Manufacturers (KAM).

As Kenya battles the third wave of the virus, Litswa reckons: "Pulse oximetry is a vital gadget at all levels of patient care and must be affordable and available."

He says soon medical supplies will be strained and hence the need to boost local manufacturing.

In West Pokot, more than 300 front-line health workers were supplied with PPE. "The supplies by Equity Foundation were of high level," said Dr David Karuri, the medical superintendent at Kapenguria Referral Hospital.

Jacqueline Tindi, the critical care in-charge at Kenyatta University Teaching and Referral and Research Hospital (KUTRTH), ICU unit, said the steady supply of standard PPEs has reduced fatality and infections among medics and patients.

Dr Edward Maina, the chair, Covid-19 Commodity Security Committee at KUTRTH, added: "Since the coming in of Equity Foundation, we have enough stocks in our store, which we distribute to our isolation units, ICU and HDU."