

Rural healthcare and digitalisation

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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Given the proliferation of mobile devices in Africa, it makes sense that digital tools would alleviate many of the healthcare issues in the out-of-the-way places on the continent. It has also created a booming market for innovators and entrepreneurs.



Photo: Seed

Vula Mobile

Even if you live in an urban area, it can take you ages to get an appointment with a specialist. Now imagine being a young doctor in a small clinic in the sticks with a difficult case that needs specialist help. The only link to the outside world is your cell phone.

This is the situation ophthalmologist, Dr William Mapham, found himself in at a small eye in Swaziland, and so the idea of [Vula Mobile](#) was born.

In a nutshell, the app gives rural doctors a set of digital tools – such as a vision test – to assess a patient. The case is then referred to the specialist on Vula's on-call system. Typically response time is about 15 minutes.

On the other side, the specialist receives a complete electronic patient record that includes pictures, a vision test result and

the patient's history.

For obvious reasons, the app's development started with ophthalmology, but has expanded into other specialties including orthopaedics, dermatology, burns, HIV, family medicine, internal medicine, neurosurgery, ENT, cardiology and oncology. Plans are afoot to add surgery, obs and gynae and paediatrics.

National digital strategy

Discussing integrating digital tools into the national healthcare strategy, Mapham says that unlike other sectors, the wheels turn very slowly when it comes to getting approval for a new drug or diagnostic tool. But he maintains this is a good thing. "You don't want to experiment on patients, and you need to show evidence of the benefits."

Fortunately, by their very nature, digital tools produce lots and lots of data to back up their usefulness. However, he explains that despite support from hospitals and healthcare professionals, "it still took us two years to get any recognition from the Department of Health".

South Africa's healthcare structure is designed so a lot of the power lies with the provincial departments of health. "The key decision makers are not who you think they are. Medicine is hierarchical, if you get the leaders on board, such as a head of department, things get done."

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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