Holding up our end of the line
Digital entrepreneurs adapting and innovating during the coronavirus crisis

Omolola Salako is an oncologist, physician innovator, entrepreneur, educator, and a UICC Young Leader. As the founder of Sebecclly Cancer Care and Support Centre, an NGO, and Oncopadi, a digital patient navigation platform as well as a Lecturer at the College of Medicine, University of Lagos, Omolola has experienced changes on many levels due to the current pandemic. In this report, Omolola explains the steps she made to ensure that her organisations would not only continue to operate during the pandemic but also that they would meet the changing needs of her staff and the cancer patients availing of their services.

"Not everyone has an oncologist within reach, but most people have a smartphone."

Adapting our activities

Working remotely
When the COVID-19 pandemic started, we promptly realised three things:

1. The public needed a source of accurate information and support.
2. People living with cancer were hesitant to visit hospitals and wanted alternative services for information and counselling,
3. Not everyone has a doctor within reach, but most people have a phone.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our work which was largely dependent on physical presence, face-to-face meetings and we knew we had to adapt quickly whilst managing a healthy work-life balance.

We had a strategic team meeting to discuss how to digitize our daily work activities and processes. We set a schedule for regular digital team meetings and identified appropriate platforms that would allow us to do the same thing digitally such as Zoom for our meetings and Asana for project management. In the office we would share ideas and stick notes on a wall, now we use Evernote to do that.

We strengthened the team with digital experts who provide advisory and consulting services to the organization and recruited tech professionals to lead our digital transformation.

I shared this experience in more detail with UICC members during a recent Special Focus Dialogue on Digital Leadership.

Provision of online information and support
In addition to the changes made to the way we worked as a team, we also knew that we needed to adapt the way we delivered our services and supported cancer patients during this time.

We created a WhatsApp group for our patients, to ensure they could ask any questions they may have and receive prompt, reliable information from cancer experts and survivors.

We are fortunate that over the last four years we have been working on Oncopadi, a digital patient navigation platform specifically for cancer patients. Oncopadi has served thousands of cancer patients.
patients and caregivers across eight countries and these locations keep growing organically. Our mission is to expand humane cancer care in the health ecosystem in Nigeria and across Low and Middle-Income Countries.

In April, we opened Oncopadi to other specialties such as COVID-19, gynaecology and paediatrics, but after a month, we decided to focus on serving people with oncology needs from cancer prevention, diagnosis and treatment to palliative care and bereavement services. This was a defining moment, as we were able to navigate more than 50 cancer patients in May and onboarded 15 clinical oncologists and two cancer clinics.

Increasing Access to Remote Cancer Care
From our tele-oncology experience, we established that people living with cancer had limited access to care because cancer clinics were either shut or partially operational and patients and caregivers were hesitant to visit the hospital despite having symptoms or questions. We also observed a surge of e-patients searching for cancer support and information online.

In response to meeting their needs and simplifying cancer care, Sebeccl Cancer Care in partnership with Oncopadi Technologies LTD and ACT Foundation is launching the SOAR Program on 9 August 2020 via the Oncopadi web and mobile app.

The SOAR Program is centered on:

1. Democratizing cancer care during this period of uncertainty and beyond. From the comfort of their homes cancer patients can connect with oncologists, survivors, and resources.

2. Connecting the ecosystem: Oncopadi is the platform that has brought 20+ cancer care providers from the public and private sector to directly and promptly serve cancer patients.

3. User Feedback: The cancer patient is the first P in our Patient, Partnership with Public-Private Providers model. As we re-engineer how cancer patients receive care and support, we are constantly collecting user feedback to improve our processes and the patient’s experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic created problems and as changemakers, we are holding up the end of our line by providing a free platform for patients and survivors to be equal partners in their care.

\[“By accelerating the e-patient movement we will educate, engage, empower and encourage more people living with cancer.”\]

Looking to the future
The best lessons I have learned as a leader over the last few months is to stop prioritizing that the best work happens in the office. I am in awe of my team’s commitment and hard work despite the challenges that occurred. Our network of survivors and volunteers have been phenomenal.

I encourage everyone to nurture their ideas, act on your intuition, create tangible results and at the set time the Universe will align to grant you wild success. In the space of 4 months working from home, we have interacted with cancer patients from the six geo-political zones in Nigeria, we have one in four Nigerian Oncologists consulting online, we attracted grants and repurposed past grants to support our digital projects. This experience has undeniably strengthened us as a team.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a test of resilience and humanity, we must be bold to step out and lend a helping hand with whatever we have got - kind words, a check-in call with colleagues and friends, sharing our talents and collaborating to deliver impactful programs.

The unprecedented pandemic has allowed us to advance our digital work, especially in relation to Oncopadi. I believe that digital health is essential in helping us to achieve our mission which is to empower cancer patients. With over 100,000,000 Nigerians online, using technology to teach people about cancer and connect with cancer patients is a low hanging fruit and we are inspired by our results to do more.