



**I wasn't fulfilled practising
medicine — PSHAN MD,
Tinuola Akinbolagbe**

I love working with young people

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Tinuola Akinbolagbe is the Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Private Sector Health Alliance of Nigeria. She tells FAITH AJAYI about her career and other issues

MEDICINE is regarded as one of the most prestigious professions in Nigeria. Was that your reason for studying it?

In the past, studying professional courses such as medicine, engineering, law and accounting were preferred career tracks in Nigeria, but this has evolved over the years, and we now have a wider range of professional options which offer great career opportunities.

My choice of medicine was influenced in part by my elder sister, who is also a medical doctor, and my fascination with science.

Take us through your career trajectory.

My career trajectory has been quite varied. I started in clinical medicine, working in both public and private sector health facilities before veering into healthcare financing (health insurance), where for over a decade, I had roles in client relations management, benefits administration and claims adjudication, providing network management, and risk management.

This was followed by a period in health information technology, working with a health-tech firm based in the MENA region. This developed my entrepreneurial side; then me and my (business) partner established a health consulting firm which is now a registered health maintenance organisation in Nigeria. Shortly after, I transitioned to the health diagnostics sector, serving as the country Chief Executive Officer for one of the leading providers of diagnostic services in Europe.

My current role is as the MD/CEO of the Private Sector Health Alliance of Nigeria, a non-profit organisation, where I work with a talented team of professionals to improve health outcomes through collaboration between the private and public sectors.

Since your appointment into this position, what has been your major highlight?

There are many positives to working in this position, which provides a great

opportunity for partnerships with members of the organised private sector, international and multilateral agencies, embassies, other non-profit organisations, and the public sector at the national and sub-national levels.

A major highlight for me and my team was the launch of the Adopt-a-Healthcare Facility Programme, which is a pioneering private sector-led initiative to establish one world-class primary healthcare centre in each of the 774 local government areas in the country.

Our objective is to mobilise funds, resources and skill sets from organisations, groups and individuals, which will be pooled to provide infrastructure, medical equipment and furniture, power, potable water, human resources for health, drugs and medicaments, capacity building, governance and quality controls at each of these primary health centres.

We will rebuild public trust in the PHCs and redirect the tide of patients who currently clog the tertiary healthcare level in a bid to access primary healthcare services.

As the CEO of the PSHAN, what are your roles?

I am responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations and overall management of the organisation under the authority of the board of directors. Specifically, I work with team members and partner organisations to support the coordinated involvement of the private sector in improving the health and economic productivity of the country.

We elevate the business voice to policymakers and provide a visible platform to recognise and share private sector contributions to improve health within the workplace and communities. I run the operations of the organisation as an advocate and change agent, building and driving a small high-performance team towards quality execution and financial sustainability.

What are some of the challenges you have had to face in your current position?

Generally, it can be challenging working in an emerging market like Nigeria where several factors can frustrate the efforts of the business community. Thankfully, Nigeria has shown some improvement by rising on the World Bank's ease of doing business index to 131 out of 190 countries, and this improvement needs to be sustained. Specifically, in the non-profit sector, it can be challenging to demonstrate the need for private sector organisations to view their contributions as more than a corporate social responsibility function but rather as an integral part of their social objectives in their environmental, social and corporate governance strategies.

How have you been able to overcome those challenges?

We have a talented group of professionals at PSHAN who are bright, hard-working and collaborative. We work tirelessly to meet our set objectives with the active support of our very pragmatic board of directors; thus, we can overcome most of these challenges.

In what way did your time at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

shape your career?

I was privileged to study at Queens College, Yaba, Lagos; before proceeding to the College of Medicine, the University of Lagos. From there, I went for a Master's in Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Those institutions provided excellent academic standards, world-class exposure and vast opportunities to all those who attended them. They all have strong alumni networks where we support one another and share opportunities for collaboration, and the chance to give back to our alma mater.

With over two decades of experience in the health services, financial and ICT sectors, what are the successes you have recorded?

Success is a relative term, as there is always more to do. I am glad to have been part of many organisations that made a huge impact on people's lives. Some of these were in clinical medicine, the health insurance sector; both as an employee and an entrepreneur, in the diagnostic sector, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where we deployed four testing facilities; and now in the non-profit sector with our pioneering the Adopt-a-Health Care Facility programme.

You worked at SYNLAB Nigeria as the CEO. What were your responsibilities?

As the country CEO, I led a team of over 250 team members across 30 locations, including seven regional laboratories and one reference laboratory. I was responsible for developing a strategic plan, providing entrepreneurial leadership, operational management, financial and regulatory compliance, and ensuring delivery of qualitative results, with outstanding customer service and prompt turnaround times, while creating and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders in the sector.

What were some of the things you learnt in that role that are still useful to you?

Honestly, I try to learn from all my roles, and I still learn every day. Generally, in my career, I have learnt to appreciate the importance of clear communication, accepting feedback graciously, getting the right team members on board, focusing on aligning objectives, so we do not function at cross-purposes, managing conflict constructively and trying not to 'sweat the small stuff'.

You worked as a healthcare professional at the Lagoon Hospital and St. Nicholas Hospital before going into medical insurance. What influenced that decision?

I realised early in my career that I was not overly fulfilled in the practice of clinical medicine; I had more of a flair for administration. Seeing the difficulties my patients faced, trying to pay for healthcare services, helped to channel my career choices. Having worked on the supply side of healthcare, one of the major barriers to accessing healthcare is out-of-pocket payment. With the low penetration of health insurance in the country, (less than 10 per cent of Nigerians have access to health insurance), encouraging Nigerians to share their financial risk for healthcare through health insurance would improve the resilience of the most vulnerable Nigerians.

Over the years, PSHAN has partnered with different groups and initiatives. What are some of the things you think those partnerships have achieved in the Nigerian health sector?

In PSHAN, our partnerships are some of our greatest achievements, because they have helped us to advance the frontiers of healthcare. One of such achievement is bridging the gap between private and public stakeholders, and facilitating funding through pooling private sector funds to improve health financing through cash and in-kind contributions to the tune of N6bn from inception till date. Another is connecting to communities through structural transformation and improvement, and contributing to research, evidence and learning to inform policy and programmes for the healthcare value chain in Nigeria.

Also, aligning with existing government machinery and key stakeholders to influence primary healthcare service delivery and increase our geographical footprints through programmes such as the ADHFP programme; as well as establishing the viability and sustainability of private-public partnerships to improve health outcomes in Nigeria.

What are some of the most significant lessons you've learnt on the job so far?

The most significant lesson I've learnt is on how to manage people effectively. I have learnt that individuals are different and have widely varying experiences, orientations, skill sets, commitment levels and work ethics. Getting disparate groups of individuals to work together, collaboratively, and in relative harmony, to achieve set group objectives is an art form and requires a lot of work.

Also, I have learnt that feedback, particularly from supervisors and senior colleagues, is a gift and must be graciously accepted and channelled to improve one's weak points and course-correct as required.

How does the scarcity of cash affect the health insurance sector?

All Nigerians are affected by the current cash scarcity. We are still a largely cash-based economy with a sizeable informal sector that, despite deliberate steps to increase financial inclusion, remains largely unbanked and outside the formal banking system, particularly in the rural areas where poor power supply and limited access to technology

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Creme de la creme

Partnerships are our greatest achievements — PSHAN MD, Tinuola Akinbolagbe

make access to fintech services low.

Ideally, this should increase the uptake of health insurance and other pre-paid health services, which would allow accessing comprehensive healthcare services with minimal out-of-pocket payments.

You are actively involved in mentoring students and young professionals. How did that journey start?

The youth truly are the future, and we must take the time to invest in them and provide support for them. I love working with young people. They are energetic, positive and enthusiastic, and often bring a refreshing perspective to issues.

I have maintained contact with many team members from my previous job roles, and often they reach out for career guidance and counsel, I also provide mentorship on some professional network platforms. I have benefitted from senior colleagues who took an interest in my career journey and mentored me. So, I feel obligated to do the same for those who come after me.

You have said that Nigeria needs huge private sector investment to deliver quality healthcare. What can be done to attract investments into the country?

It is critical to provide a conducive environment for the private sector to flourish in any environment, including the healthcare sector. There must be deliberate efforts to provide incentives for both local and international businesses to invest in the healthcare sector. The usual factors— improving the ease of doing business, power supply, harmonisation of taxation, the rule of law and an effective judiciary—ensure that grievances can be promptly and fairly resolved.

Specifically for health, the recent mandating of health insurance with the establishment of the Nigerian Health Insurance Authority, and the planned implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area provide more market opportunities.

We can take deliberate steps which target areas which would deliver the most impact for our population, specifically, primary health care services, digitisation of health records, local production of drugs and pharmaceuticals, local vaccine production and supply chain improvement.

We also need a framework that promotes public-private partnerships, builds capacity, ensures transparency and accountability and has clear policy guidelines that engender trust among key players in the sector.

You work with several charities and non-profit

organisations to raise funds for community health initiatives. What are some of the recent projects you have embarked on?

Many of them are private endeavours, working with groups of friends and small organizations. Our targets have been orphanages, homes for 'differently-abled' children, including some with congenital and cognitive problems; old people's homes, as well as health centres and educational centres. We work to provide infrastructure, facilities for training and capacity building, libraries, medication and medical services.

How do you balance work and family in such a way that none suffers?

Like most women, the most trying period of my career was when my children were infants, and I had to combine caregiving with a full-time job. Thankfully, I have a supportive spouse and an extensive family support system, which helped me to navigate this difficult period, while retaining my sanity.

What advice do you have to give to someone who is in a position like yours and is trying to balance work and family?

Some of my candid advice for work-life balance is to be principled, self-regulating and live by a set of values. Do what works for you, and don't set yourself impossible standards, or compare yourself with anyone. You are unique. Stay teachable, and build

relationships with everyone around you. You learn a lot when you stay open to opportunities. Pay it forward and 'leave the door open' for those who come after you. Also, pray often; it keeps you grounded through the worst of life's storms.

Many parents like it when their children follow in their career footsteps. Are any of your children tending towards the same career path as you?

No. They are on their career paths, and they have my full support.

Are your children closer to you or their father?

They are close to both of us.

How did you meet your husband?

We met at a social engagement, and were introduced by a mutual friend.

What are the qualities that endeared you to your husband?

He is a confident and kind person, family-oriented and supportive of my career.

What is your favourite meal?

I like most types of African cuisine.

How do you unwind?

It's a bit boring; I must confess.

I read a lot, play scrabble and sample playlists on music apps.

How do you like to dress?

I like to dress comfortably and in colour. We have huge talents in the Nigerian fashion scene who offer many affordable options.



Young Entrepreneur

People skills needed to succeed in business – Omotosho

Olamilekan Omotosho is the Chief Executive Officer of Naijaways Global Services Limited. He tells TOFARATI IGE about his career and other issues

WHAT is your educational background?

I studied Mechanical Engineering at the George Brown College in Ontario, Canada.

Do you have any corporate work experience?

After completing my bachelor's degree, I worked in the automotive industry for six years, as a tool maker and designer.

When was the first time you were exposed to the logistics business, and what fascinated you about it?

The haulage business is a family one. It was started by my grandfather, who handed it to my father. I started working with my father when I was 13 years old, and I grew to love the business and learn its ins and outs.

My solution to take the business to the next level is the reason I am here. I believe now is the time to take the transport sector (in Nigeria) to a level where it has never been before.

What did you learn from managing your father's haulage business, and how are they helping your career?

I have learnt that life is not a bed of roses. Some days would be smooth, while some days would be rocky. In business, one would be forced to learn patience, especially if one's business is in the transport sector. The drivers would frustrate one, and some customers would talk down on one. To succeed, one's people skill needs to be topnotch. During my management principle class at McMaster University, Canada, I learnt a lot about emotional intelligence. The lessons I took from that class, coupled with my experience managing my



father's business, were the things that really shaped the foundation of my company. I usually listen carefully and attentively to my customers, and they appreciate that.

Is your company registered?

Yes, it is.

When and how did you start the company?

I started the company in 2021, and was incorporated in the same year.

Upon my return to Nigeria to manage my father's business in the wake of COVID-19, I would look for trucks to rent to convey some of the goods our fleet could not carry; but all to no avail. Sometimes, I would have to drive to their parks. But, whenever I got to parks, I would find the drivers sleeping. It was then I started thinking that if the drivers could actually get jobs with just a click on their phones, instead of customers having to go all the way to the park to meet them, things would be much better. That was what led to the creation of the company as a digital market hub, where cargo owners of all kinds could meet with truck owners of all sizes within a reasonable proximity to the location of their cargo.

What services does the company offer?

We are basically a logistics and supply chain solutions company that aims to be one of the biggest in the space. Our goal is to make renting and moving cargo easier and more effective.

What motivated you to start your own business?

Transportation, at all levels, is an integral part of any economy. Manufactured goods have to be transported. It is a good business, and with better practices, things can get better.

We live in a society where everybody wants to be doctor, lawyer or engineer; forgetting that someone still has to do the other jobs, which are also need

for the smooth running of a country. I hope to see a day where a child can proudly say that they want to become truck drivers. However, that can only happen when the person knows that he can sustain his family with the job.

Why did you decide to study Mechanical Engineering?

I have always been a critical thinker. When I was younger, a technician used to fix our generator. One time, it broke down and I fixed it. The technician took an interest in me and started showing me how to fix things. I like to solve problems. A lot of my time is spent thinking of how to solve everyday problems in the most cost-effective and efficient ways. Therefore, when the opportunity came for me to travel to Canada, I decided to study Mechanical Engineering.

In what ways do you think technology can be deployed to improve the lives of Nigerians?

The current cash scarcity could have been averted, if the country had integrated technology through accessible point of sales terminals. If that had been done, the last couple of weeks would have gone smoother, and could have generated new streams of revenue for Nigerians. Technology can be integrated to improve the lives of Nigerians by making it accessible for everyone.

What major challenges have you faced in the course of running the business?

Infrastructure is a major challenge. The cost of diesel and its price fluctuations is another issue.

Also, the lack of proper training for drivers is quite a challenge. Given the educational level of most drivers, it is difficult to change their ways, because they are often set in their ways.

Lastly, the maintenance culture of truck owners is a big challenge.

How do you advertise?

I have been trying to leverage on the connections and network I have in Nigeria and Canada. I am also growing our online presence.

What kind of support did you receive from your family and friends when you started the business?

My sister has always been a big supporter of mine. My friends and the people around me have also been supporting the vision in their own ways.

Nigeria is experiencing a huge brain drain, with many professionals travelling out of the country to seek greener pastures. What do you think can be done to stem this tide?

Investing in talent and creating opportunity for growth is the surest way to correct this issue. People naturally like to feel valued. Professionals are travelling or even running away because they feel Nigeria is stifling their growth. Opportunities should be created for professionals to grow. Also, anyone who is in a position to nurture and invest in their talents should do that.

What advice do you have for other young entrepreneurs?

People might travel from thousands of miles away to support one's cause, while the people closest to one might not even acknowledge it. Stay dedicated and put your trust in God. Hard work is lonely but success is shared. That is the way of life.