# Women of Colour in NHS Digital Health and Technology

## Introduction:

Q: How many times have you seen an all-female and black and ethnic minority (BME) panel talking about technology?

A: For many people their first time would have been the Shuri Network launch last July.

The Shuri Network was launched in 2019 to support women of colour in NHS digital health develop the skills and confidence to progress into senior leadership positions and help NHS leadership teams more closely represent the diversity of their workforce. Our network champions **diversity, innovation and safety** across the health and care workforce, engaging with national bodies, research / policy institutes and senior leaders to ensure this is built into policy and systems. We are the only network specifically for women of colour in digital health and care.



**Figure 1: The Shuri team with Matthew Gould, Chief Executive of NHSX, July 2019**

# Achievements:

It has been an incredible year from when we first burst onto the scene at the [Digital Health Summer School in Leeds](). You could hear a pin drop as our panel shared our experiences as women of colour in health technology, why diversity is a patient safety issue and how to build an inclusive team.

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the value of digital solutions in connecting patients, clinical teams and delivering safe services in extraordinary circumstances. The pace of digital transformation we have seen in the NHS is likely to be sustained and we must therefore develop a digitally confident workforce with the skills and leadership to transform how we use data and technology.

However, although 77% of the NHS workforce is female and 20% are people of colour, there are currently less than ten BME women in Chief Clinical Information Officer (CCIO), Chief Information Officer (CIO) or equivalent roles in the NHS out of around 500 senior digital leaders (<2%). We want to change this.

The NHS Long Term Plan states that "respect, equality and diversity will be central to changing the culture of the NHS and will be at the heart of the workforce implementation plan. The NHS draws on a remarkably rich diversity of people to provide care to our patients. But we fall short in valuing their contributions and ensuring fair treatment and respect."



**Figure 2 : The Shuri panel, July 2019: Sarah Amani, Dr Ijeoma Azodo, Professor Laura Serrant, Sonia Patel, Heather Caudle and Dr Shera Chok.**

**Our Network champions and campaigns for:**

- A more inclusive digital health leadership community that reflects the NHS workforce
- Collaboration with the private tech sector and other public sector organisations to create opportunities to learn and identify inspirational role models
- Digital innovation by spreading best practice and learning from exemplars
- Development of a more diverse stock and pipeline of digital health leaders

We have achieved most of our objectives set for 2019/20 in less than a year.

**We have done this by:**

- Identifying women of colour who indicate an interest or role in digital health.
- Exploring the support needed by women at different career stages and during the Covid crisis.
- Leading meetings, webinars and podcasts to provide practical career advice, highlight role models and current advances in digital health.
- Sharing resources, courses and job opportunities via social media @networkshuri, our website and our newsletter.
- Promoting and communicating the need for diversity and benefits of the network to NHS organisations, the private tech sector and individuals.
- Developed a bursary scheme to support professional and personal development.
- Challenging organisations like NHS England and NHSX to do better on diversity and inclusion from recruitment processes to developing new technology e.g. AI and Apps and showing them why they would benefit from this.

Our members can access support and expertise through the network, participate in an active learning community and in turn act as champions and pioneers in informatics and digital health to inspire the next generation.

NHS organisations will benefit by having a more diverse and inclusive digital leadership body that reflects the NHS workforce and supports better staff engagement. This will improve safety and quality, improve recruitment and retention and speed up the spread of innovation.

Feedback has been tremendously positive, with comments including:

> *"It's brilliant to be in Leeds with 500 committed, excited, positive new friends. Highlight of an amazing morning was the Shuri Network panel, challenging us to do better on diversity and reminding why we will be better if we did." Matthew Gould, CEO, NHSX.*

> *"Super proud to be part of the Shuri Network who have already achieved such an increase in awareness of the benefits of diversity in leadership roles."*

Our membership has grown to over 500 members and allies from across the UK. Membership is free and open to women of colour who are currently in or interested in digital health and informatics roles as well as everyone who supports our aims.

Since our launch we have provided support to our members through a wide range of activities:

- Outlined what the Network aims to do and why at conferences, on our website and short films.
- Provided a platform for women of colour to speak about career pathways in digital health, the value of diverse and inclusive teams and the connection to patient safety at national and regional events including the HSJ Digital Summit, Rewired, the NHS Expo, the London Leadership Summit, HETT and the Faculty of Clinical Informatics.
- Highlighting successful women in technology such as Sonia Patel, CIO for NHS England and Sarah Jensen, CIO from Barts Health, sharing our experience and practical career advice and why diversity and inclusion need to be built into every digital change programme in healthcare.
- To encourage more BAME women to apply for the NHS Digital Academy programme, our co-founder, Sarah Amani led a webinar with Digital Academy alumni Dr Ayesha Rahim and Zainab Hussain, discussing the programme and application process. https://zoom.us/recording/share/PQEAN8n8TM_1Nu02yl6lHge01OBvHGPVa6YVrZuWK4qwIumekTziMw
- We have written articles for and been interviewed by leading publications including the HSJ, BMJ, HIMSS and Digital Health on a range of topics related to safety and technology.
- Our co-founder, Dr Shera Chok, organised a webinar with Sky News, the RCN and BMA leaders on Covid-19 and the impact on BAME communities and was interviewed by the BBC World service on the same topic.
- We share opportunities for women of colour including scholarships, relevant courses, jobs and other resources on our website, social media and at events.
- We have also spoken at schools to encourage students to consider a career in the NHS and digital health.

Our co-founder, Sarah Amani, a mental health nurse by background, won the inaugural national BAME Health and Care digital champion award in 2019 for her contribution to championing diversity in digital health. We were also delighted that Sonia Patel, one of our launch panel members, was appointed as NHS England's Chief Information Officer in 2020.

## Our commitment to quality and patient experience:

Inclusion is a vital patient safety issue and improving the quality of care we offer patients is at our heart. Without a diverse and inclusive team, unconscious bias can be built into technology, ultimately putting patients at risk. We are raising awareness of these issues, which have been heightened during the last few months as significant health inequalities and increased adverse outcomes affecting minority groups have come to light.

We work in partnership with NHS trusts, Health Education England, the Royal College of Nursing, NHSX, BME networks, national think tanks like the Health Foundation, the care and private sectors and international organisations such as the Salzburg Global Foundation to build an environment where everyone is able to speak up about technology to ensure that it is safe, appropriate and equitable for our patients.



## Leadership during the crisis and beyond:

The disproportionate deaths of BAME patients and health and care staff during the coronavirus pandemic has caused tremendous anger, mistrust and fear. We have responded to this by working with NHS England and NHSX to increase communication and engagement with BME communities about preventing the spread of the virus, evaluate the impact of their interventions and co-produce digital products such as the NHS contact tracing app with high-risk communities. This has been challenging as it has meant confronting a deeply entrenched NHS culture that has not valued diversity of thought or leadership.

However, it is during times of stress that our values and leadership are tested, and the unique value added by our Network will have a real impact. We know that BAME staff are more likely to struggle to be shortlisted for jobs and experience bullying and discrimination at work and that this can affect patient care and clinical outcomes. We are therefore providing a safe support network where members can share their experiences, build connections and collectively challenge the NHS to shift the needle and increase BME representation in decision-making and leadership.

# Feedback:

We have received excellent feedback from our members and allies including:

"What a wonderful initiative. Love the logo, love the name, love the spirit. Go Shuri !"

"Feeling so moved, empowered to learn more about how to support and champion my colleagues in health tech and digital health."

"Your passion for supporting diversity is truly infectious! Coming from a profession with only 12% BAME representation, the Network is such a great model for change."

"Out of all my years in health tech, it was this moment with the Shuri Network where the penny dropped to the audience that this is not about hitting numbers but is a mindset of 'diversity by default' that we ALL need to have to serve diverse needs."

"A huge thanks to all of you who organised today's event, which was most successful. We need to see long overdue change happen and this event was an important part of that calling."