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HIV/AIDS and mobile technology: sms saving lives in Africa

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Two new mobile technology programs in South Africa and Kenya are helping HIV/AIDS sufferers and their carers cope with the challenges.

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With overburdened health care systems and a shortage of doctors, South Africa and Kenya face an uphill battle with HIV/AIDS. Women are the majority of the poor people in the world and therefore are drastically affected by the pricing and availability of essential medicines. In addition, the burden of care for the sick and elderly, as well as the rise in orphans, have increased drastically and have fallen on women who have little or no access to the essential medicines needed to treat sick people both in their homes and in their communities.

This new mobile technology can provide a lifeline for both HIV/AIDS sufferers and their caregivers.

Approximately five million South Africans are infected with HIV, with two million Kenyans infected. Both countries are implementing anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment programs, but to date have had marginal success. In South Africa, which has the highest number of HIV/AIDS infected population in the world, a local advocacy group, the Treatment Action Campaign, mounted a lawsuit over the poor implementation of the ARV program.

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How can mobile technology help?

Remote locations without computers or even electricity face steep challenges in terms of the implementation of drug programs. People miss their appointments either because they have limited access to transport or because they simply can't afford the fare, and dangerous side effects from the drugs become an even greater danger where time and access to communication is a matter of life or death. Access, amenities and transport are the biggest problems.

Mobile technology is widely used, popular among the younger generations who are the most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, cheap and requires little infrastructure. Harnessing this type of technology is an innovative step forward in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Kenya

In Kenya, One World has launched a service using text messages whereby people can text questions regarding HIV/AIDS to a special number and receive a reply. Daily tips are also sent out to subscribers detailing how to prevent and deal with infection. Information is held in a database in both the English and Swahili languages, but the text message service is currently only available in English, with a Swahili version on the way.

According to the BBC around the time of the launch, it was reported that approximately 2.5 million people in Kenya are mobile phone users because it is much cheaper than Internet access. In contrast, those with Internet access number five times lower than those with mobile phones.

Text messaging is easy, cheap and popular, and people can have access to information which is anonymous – an important step in the fight against HIV/AIDS given that the stigma, although decreased, remains problematic in the region. Access to the right information about HIV/AIDS is problematic, especially for young women who face increased barriers to education via a lack of social and economic empowerment.

South Africa

In South Africa, a new mobile phone software system called Cell Life is providing a virtual infrastructure where there is no actual infrastructure. 40 percent of South Africa's population uses mobile phones, and the network covers 90 percent of the country – making mobile technology a significant partner in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The new system allows doctors and caregivers to manage an information database containing a patient's treatment history, from remote locations using sms. When they visit a patient they are able to report on side effects, check pill counts against data from the pharmacy, and provide additional information such as conditions that interfere in the treatment program like the absence of food and extreme poverty .

In addition, symptoms indicative of dangerous side effects can be dealt with straight away by sending an sms to the clinic and

arranging an appointment as quickly as possible. Faults in the treatment programs that originally took months to sort out because details of each visit were written out by hand, are now dealt with straight away – leaving valuable time for solving problems rather than reporting them.

For a country where up to 600 people are dying every day from HIV/AIDS related illnesses and where young women constitute the most vulnerable group, this type of technology has the potential to bridge an enormous gap in the ARV treatment programs. Currently only 30,000 people are accessing medication - far short of the official target of having 53,000 people on antiretroviral therapy (ART) by March 2005. As activists continue their struggle for the rapid provision of free ARVs in developing countries, this type of new technology – developed by the University of Cape Town and the Cape Technikon – is helping to keep people alive.

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