

Mobiles 'to help track diseases'

Mobile phone technology is being developed to help manage the spread of diseases such as HIV and bird flu.

The software is designed to allow field workers using handsets to send and receive data on disease outbreaks along with patient and drug information.

The project is a collaboration between technology firm Voxiva and the trade association for mobile operators, GSMA.

Trials of the relatively low-cost application are underway in Rwanda, Africa and in Indonesia.

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Rob Conway, GSMA

The program works by sending the data through the general packet radio service (GPRS) network, and if this is unavailable, it can divert to an SMS data channel, normally used for text messages.

It is programmed using java language, so can work across different handsets and operators.

This means a doctor working in the field can send information to a central database about how many people are affected by a disease, patient status, drug inventory levels and receive information such as alerts, treatment guidelines or lab test results.

Ben Soppitt, director of strategic initiatives, GSMA, said: "This will allow health officials to see real-time accurate data on the status of the healthcare system in their country so they can make informed decisions about where those resources are applied."

'Vital data'

GSMA and Voxiva said the technology will be particularly valuable for helping to track communicable diseases, such as HIV. A pilot to the system's ability to track bird flu is also taking place in Indonesia.

Rob Conway, CEO of GSMA, said: "The efforts of the international health community to control pandemics, by getting life-saving drugs to those in need, depend heavily on a comprehensive and accurate picture of what is happening on the ground.

"When a disease is spreading rapidly, health authorities need information that is bang-up-to-date. Mobile networks, which are now widespread in the developing world, are the best and most immediate way to get them that vital data."

The cost of rolling out the technology in Rwanda, including setting-up and implementation costs, is about \$1m.

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