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PHONES HEALTH WP

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Cell phones mobilized to fight AIDS in Africa

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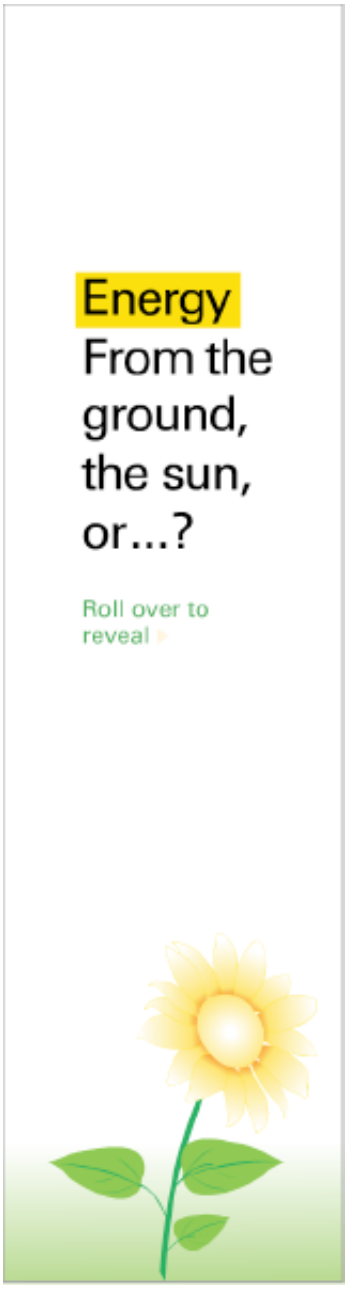

Reuters
Tuesday, February 13, 2007; 9:08 AM

BARCELONA (Reuters) - Mobile phones are being harnessed to fight HIV/AIDS in Africa under a new $10-million scheme announced on Tuesday with the backing of leading companies and the U.S. government.

The "Phones-for-Health" project will use software loaded on to a standard Motorola handset to allow care workers in the field to enter critical health information into a central database in real time.

It will be transmitted using a standard GPRS mobile connection or, where this is not available, via an SMS channel.

The idea is to tap into the growing reach of mobile technology, which has leapfrogged older communication systems in many African countries.

Fixed-line telephone and Internet connections are rare across much of the continent, making pen and paper still the principal way of recording the spread of disease.

But more than 60 percent of Africans now live in areas with mobile phone coverage and that figure is expected to rise to 85 percent by 2010, according to the GSM Association, a global trade group representing leading mobile operators.

"The explosive spread of mobile phone networks across the developing world has created a unique opportunity to significantly transform how countries can tackle global health challenges," World Health Organization Assistant Director-General Howard Zucker said.

The new scheme builds on the success of a pilot project in Rwanda and will focus initially on the battle against HIV/AIDS in 10 African countries. South Africa's MTN is the first operator partner in the program.

Longer term, the hope is that the scheme will be extended further in Africa and spread to Asia to address other infectious diseases, including malaria and tuberculosis, the partners behind the launch said at the 3GSM World Congress in Barcelona.

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