

Text Messages To Boost Immunization

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By **Sushmita Malviya** (India)

India's densely populated state of Uttar Pradesh is enlisting technology in an effort to boost its vaccination coverage as part of a polio eradication and immunization program. Currently, 32 percent of Uttar Pradesh's population is vaccinated. The **World Health Organization** has set a global goal for every district within a country to achieve an 80 percent rate of vaccination coverage.

In early July, the Gautam Buddha Nagar district of Western Uttar Pradesh launched a new project that uses mobile phones to notify parents of every newborn child about their child's immunization requirements. Operated by the health department, Arogyadeep, as the project is called, sends parents an SMS text message with details about their child's vaccination due date and vaccine type.



Child Receiving Polio Vaccination

Gautam Buddha Nagar's government hopes to increase its 52 percent rate of vaccination coverage. "We are aware that vaccination coverage in our district is low and we wanted to find a way to deal with this," said Gautam Buddha Nagar District Magistrate Deepak Agarwal. "We would like to look at something close to 100 percent vaccination with the help of Arogyadeep."

Since April 1, 2010, the administration has been keeping track of hospital births and plans to send personalized SMS messages to parents a day before the child's vaccination due date. The department will also be sending songs to mobile phones informing parents about the vaccination date and the type of vaccination.

The district administration hopes to reach 40,000 families through Arogyadeep. So far, the administration claims that it has been able to register 1,000 families and inform them about their vaccination schedules.

The district chose to use a phone-based program because more than half of its residents have access to a mobile phone. A recent survey found that nearly 60 percent of families have access to mobile phones.

This is not the first time that efforts such as these have been tried out in the state. Since 2008, the district administration in Bagpat, also in western Uttar Pradesh, has operated a technology-based health care delivery system to address the district's poor immunization rate. An interactive voice recording system updates residents with mobile phones about the next polio vaccination round, prenatal visits to the doctor for pregnant women and much more. Known as "Arogyam Kendras," the administration provides this service for free. Every family is assigned an 8-digit unique ID. Once the family is registered, depending on its needs, the "Arogyam Kendra" sends regular alerts.

Maintaining accurate and current family records can be an obstacle to the successful implementation of these technology-based projects. For example, in Gautam Buddha Nagar, the district immunization officer Dr. PK Singh explained, "The data collection has been a problem, because we get household data only from the polio teams that go house to house almost every month."

Despite these challenges, momentum is gaining for replication of these programs. A third district in Western Uttar Pradesh, Jyotiba Phule Nagar, has rolled out a similar program. A proposal has already been sent to the Uttar Pradesh government for the replication of the SMS message program statewide.



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