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COUNTERING FAKE MEDICINES

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Mobile Phones Fight Africa's Drug Wars

New systems that let users dial up to verify antimalarial and other drugs' authenticity could be a major defense against counterfeit meds

By Simeon Bennett

While malaria is relatively easy to treat if caught early, it kills nearly 900,000 people a year, mostly in Africa. That's because across much of the continent, malaria medicine is hard to come by, and even when available, it's often fake. Although it may be years before every African has access to treatment, new technology could let anyone with a mobile phone verify that drugs are the real deal.

At least two rival systems plan to put unique codes on packages containing antimalarials and other medications. Buyers will be able to text the code to a phone number on the package and get an immediate reply of "NO" or "OK," with the drug's name, expiration date, and other information. "This is a big blow to counterfeiting," says Bright Simons, co-founder of mPedigree, a Ghanaian startup working with Hewlett-Packard (HPQ) on one of the systems.

Simons expects to put 10-digit codes on about 125,000 packets of malaria medications in Ghana and Nigeria in a six-month trial starting in December. In 2008, mPedigree did a trial with bottles of acetaminophen syrup. At the urging of pharmacists, nearly all 3,000 customers who bought the syrup sent in the code, Simons says. "When a pharmacist tells a patient that something is worth doing in Africa, they listen," he says.

Nigeria's drug regulator is testing a rival service with Glucophage, a diabetes treatment from Germany's Merck (MRK). That service was developed by Ashifi Gogo, an mPedigree co-founder who left to start his own company, Sproxil. By June, Gogo expects to have codes on 1.5 million packs of Glucophage, and he says he's in negotiations with other pharmaceutical companies.

Drugmakers will pay for the systems through subscription fees. Using mPedigree's technology will add about 4 cents to the cost of a typical $4 malaria treatment, Simons says. He's confident that will be more than offset by a reduction in counterfeits. London-based Glaxo-SmithKline (GSK) says it's considering using mPedigree's technology, and Simons is in discussions with three other big drugmakers, he says. His company wrote software that generates the codes and checks them against a database stored in computers run by HP. "We'll be able to get information back to the pharmaceutical companies about where their drug is actually being used," says Mick Keyes, an HP executive overseeing the program. "They like the model."

Dozens of companies are developing anti-counterfeiting technologies such as holograms and bar codes. But mobile phones may be a simpler and cheaper solution, says Patrick Lukulay of the United States Pharmacopeial Convention, a Maryland nonprofit that tracks fakes. "In a low-tech, resource-limited environment it's very effective," Lukulay says. "It's using a technology that millions of people have access to."

The bottom line: *As mobile phones spread across the developing world, they're being used in unexpected ways—including, now, to fight counterfeit drugs.*

Bennett is a reporter for Bloomberg News.