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MEDICINE MONITORING

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'Pill-check' SMS the cure?

MUNYARADZI MAKONI AND CHRISTINA SCOTT - Sep 13 2009 06:00

Activists who use cellphone text messages to expose missing essential drugs from clinics in Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Malawi say the same system would work well in South Africa.

Members of the public run a "pill check", visiting public hospitals to check the availability of drugs at their local clinic or hospital pharmacy.

If they are turned away on the grounds that essential items are out of stock, an SMS relays the news to another cellphone, this time linked to a computer run by the African wing of the civic group Health Action International (HAI).

Software automatically punches a red dot into an online map, as long as the activists use a code. (A normal SMS from a member of the public is put in manually, after staff double-check the information.)

As shortages worsen, the dot swells in size. When an internet user clicks on the dot, a pop-up bubble displays details of what is out of stock -- contradicting possible government denials.

Within one week more than 250 out-of-stock medicines -- including anti-malarials, penicillin, antiretrovirals, diarrhoea medication and zinc tablets -- were reported in the four countries. More than 100 public hospitals and clinics in Kenya alone were exposed for operating without essential medicines.

The Kenyan government has now earmarked more of taxpayers' funds for healthcare in the 2009/10 budget, with Medical Services Minister Anyang Nyongo telling lawmakers that the money will go to purchase medicine.

Patrick Mubangizi, the regional coordinator for HAI-Africa, says the government response shows the strength of the "thumb wars" campaign. "We were glad that the Kenyan government finally acknowledged the problem and are optimistic that the other four countries will follow suit."

Michael Ballard, a design and technology master's student at Parsons New School for Design in New York, said: "The next step will be decided after we understand how willing the government is to cooperate with us. We would like access to medicine stock data so that the system could be interactive."

Tanzanian new-media consultant Ndesanjo Macha, who worked on the Malawi and Uganda campaigns, is optimistic about the results: "I see the possibility of having a system whereby a consumer sends a text to a number and gets a response about which medicines are available and which are out of stock -- saving time and money."

Brett David, who works with campaigns in East and Southern Africa for the health media initiative of the Open Society Institute, said: "I think this could work very well in South Africa -- we have widespread cellphone use and good internet speeds compared with other countries."

Source: Mail & Guardian Online
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