Texting for change: good m-Health practice in Tanzania

MEDICI CON L'AFRICA
CUAMM
Doctors with Africa

Tanzania

Population:	53.47 million
Rural population:	69%
People living with HIV:	1.4 million
Adult HIV prevalence:	4.7%
Physician/inhabitants:	0.3 per 10,000
Mobile phones in Tanzania:	39.8 million
Internet users:	4.9%

The mobile revolution

Mobile phones, a rarity in many developing countries at the turn of the century, now seem ubiquitous. The number of mobile phone users in the world is expected to pass the seven billion mark by the end of 2016.

In recent years use of mobile phones in Tanzania has exploded exponentially: the share of population owning a phone increased from 10% in 2002 to 73% in 2014.

In 2015 there were nearly 40 million mobile phones in active use in the country, employed primarily for sending text messages (80%) and photos/videos (53%), e-banking (30%) and social networking (19%).

The mobile revolution is moving forward in Africa, transforming livelihoods, helping to create new businesses, and changing the way Africans communicate.

Mobile devices for health

The term "mobile health" (or mHealth) means the use of information and communication technologies to improve healthcare services and information. mHealth applications can improve patient care by helping ensure drug compliance (through text message reminders to take medicines and follow-up), enhance patient understanding in the post-treatment phase, and improve both public healthcare and the delivery of health information to practitioners, researchers, and patients. mHealth also has huge potential for awareness-raising among communities about the most significant health issues affecting them. All of this is thanks to mobile technology, a rapid and affordable means of communication.

Raising awareness in Shinyanga

In July 2015 Doctors with Africa CUAMM launched a project to strengthen the HIV/AIDS care and treatment services offered by Diocesan health facilities in Shinyanga Region in northern Tanzania.

In order to reach as many people as possible with information about the disease, the NGO decided to use text messages as a complement to more traditional communication methods, sending 25,000 messages in five separate rounds to 5,000 mobile phone users living in the target area of the project.

The goal was to increase awareness in the community about the importance of HIV testing and counseling, and to let people know about the possibility of having such a test as well as about mother-to-child transmission and the benefits of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs. Text messages were in both Kiswahili, the national language, and Kisukuma, the local dialect.

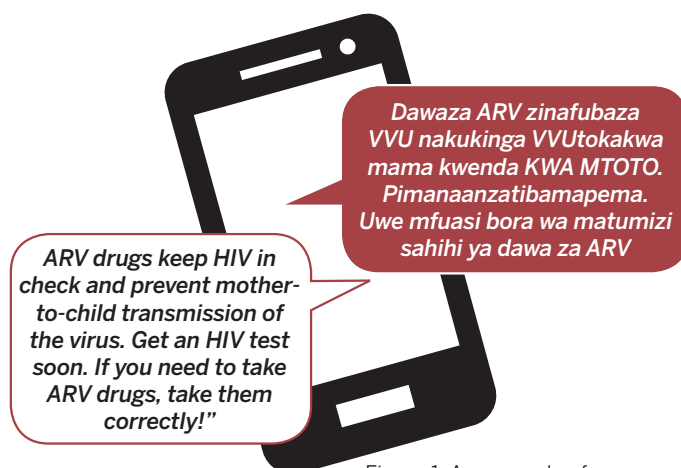99.5% of the mobile phone users targeted received the messages.

Dawaza ARV zinafubaza VVU nakukinga VVUtokakwa mama kwenda KWA MTOTO. Pimanaanzatibamapema. Uwe mfuasi bora wa matumizi sahihi ya dawa za ARV

ARV drugs keep HIV in check and prevent mother-to-child transmission of the virus. Get an HIV test soon. If you need to take ARV drugs, take them correctly!"

Figure 1. An example of messagge in the local language (swahili)

Overcoming the obstacles

As many Tanzanian communities are isolated and scattered across the territory, attempts by local health facilities to communicate with them risk failing to reach much of their target. Text messaging makes it possible to overcome such obstacles and to reach even communities living in remote areas at moderate cost.

Moreover, communicating via text message makes it possible to avoid the social stigmatization of those affected by HIV. It is a discreet and personal method of communication that allows health providers to reach out to their patients in a confidential manner, providing them with customized information, reminding them of appointments and, most importantly, tracking down those who are not complying with their treatment.

References

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