

Mobilizing mobile phones to improve health services

PERHAPS no other region of the world has been more affected by the introduction of mobile phones than Africa, and the rapid spread of mobile technology could enhance child survival and other public health initiatives. Over the past 10 years, nearly every country in Africa has launched sophisticated mobile phone systems, and the number of people with access to phones has increased a hundredfold – the largest growth rate of cellular telephone subscribers in the world. Great variations in coverage remain, ranging from 724 mobile phones per 1,000 inhabitants in South Africa to 32 per 1,000 in Rwanda. But fully 60 per cent of Africans live in areas with cellular coverage, and that figure is expected to rise to 85 per cent by 2010.

Mobile technology is seen as having great potential to enhance approaches to advancing child health and reducing child mortality in Africa and elsewhere. Mobile phones can bridge the gap for people in rural areas where fixed landlines are not an option, and the transmission of health information may become one of their key uses in Africa. For example, mobile phones are already playing a role in enhancing care for people living with HIV by improving communication and linking patients to the health system. Text messaging can be used to spread the word on sexual health and HIV prevention, particularly among young people.

Where the AIDS epidemic threatens the lives of children's parents and caregivers, advances in treatment bolster their chances of survival. A South African-based non-profit organization provides a cellphone that allows therapeutic counsellors for patients in antiretroviral therapy to capture and transmit data as a

part of treatment aftercare – instantly sending such vital information as symptoms and adherence to drug regimens to a central database. In Rwanda, communications technology is being used to develop a unified system that provides local and national health managers with timely data for planning, and a separate initiative is allowing health officials and service providers to view, analyse and respond to vital data immediately.

Such applications have the potential to free health workers from time spent preparing and sending paper records, giving them more time to apply their training to improve children's health. As current initiatives are being evaluated and new benefits are tested, plans are already under way to expand the use of mobile phones for health care to more countries in Africa.

See References, page 52.