HIV turnaround time cut

The time it takes to communicate an HIV test result can be dramatically reduced by using a mobile phone text message, according to research in a special e-health theme issue of the Bulletin of the World Health Organization, published this month in print and online.

In the research conducted in Zambia, scientists found that turnaround times for diagnosis fell by almost half, when compared to traditional postal methods, if diagnosis was sent by text message from the testing lab to the health facility the blood sample came from.

The study found that average turnaround time for result notification to a health facility fell from 44.2 days pre-implementation to 26.7 days post-implementation.

Phil Seidenberg, of Boston University in the United States and one of the authors of the research, conducted in collaboration with the Zambia Center for Applied Health Research and Development and the Zambia ministry of health, said: “This trial showed that turnaround times for HIV test results could be reduced significantly by sending blood test results by short message service – or text message – in a country where there are limited resources, such as Zambia.

“We believe that this research highlights a possible way forward for the testing of HIV and other illnesses in the future, as it allows healthcare facilities and patients to find out their results more quickly.”
UNICEF in Zambia and the researchers recognized the problem with the return of HIV results for children getting tested across the country. UNICEF and technology company Dimagi built the SMS system in consultation with the research team.

Reuben Granich, a medical officer in the HIV/AIDS department of the World Health Organization, said: “As more people use mobile phone technology in sub-Saharan Africa, more opportunities arise to harness e- and m-medicine to support the expansion of earlier antiretroviral treatment (ART) for HIV and to retain people on ART, particularly mothers and children.”

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The Bulletin of the World Health Organization is one of the world’s leading public health journals. It is the flagship periodical of WHO, with a special focus on developing countries. Articles are peer-reviewed and are independent of WHO guidelines. Abstracts are now available in the six official languages of the United Nations.

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