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THE STORY UNDERNEATH

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KAMPALA, Nov 19 (IPS) - The growth of cellphone use, particularly in the developing world, is providing health experts with a new channel of communication to provide family planning information.

"The number of mobile subscribers is increasing at a dramatic rate with the number of global cellphone subscribers in 2006 being estimated at 2.5 billion of an estimated global population of 6.6 billion," says David Cantor, a senior technical manager of ICF Macro - a U.S.-based research firm.

"These figures are expected to grow to 3.3 billion or approximately half of the world's population by 2010, with the greatest growth in Asia, the Middle East and Africa."

Cantor, who was attending the International Conference on Family Planning held in Kampala, Uganda Nov. 15-18, says there is growing interest in the health sector in capitalising on this rapid uptake of mobile communication.

One World's Mobile4Good in Kenya uses cellphone technology to inform subscribers about opportunities for free exams or treatment, and also provides a question-and-answer service that allows individuals to ask sensitive health questions.

In South Africa and Botswana, cellular technology is being used to remind people needing to take medicines at regular intervals.

Jamaica Corker of Population Services International (PSI) - a global health programme targeting malaria, child survival, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health - says a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo where mobile users call a toll-free line to request family planning related information has shown the power of mobile technology.

Since 2005, PSI has run a toll-free line through which callers can speak to trained educators and get accurate information about family planning, or a referral to the nearest clinic or pharmacy, where one is available in the caller's location.

"While at the onset, the project was aimed at reaching more women, we have learned that mobile technology is an effective way of reaching men with family planning messages," Corker says.

"Since men are the majority of mobile phone owners, many call on behalf of their wives and girlfriends and we are able to pass the message to them as well."

The use of PSI's toll-free line by men seeking family planning information could indicate encouraging growth interest in family planning by men, perhaps facilitated by the privacy communicating by phone allows.

With the cost of mobile technology steadily falling, Cantor says the stage is set for more rapid development in the sector.

Aside from providing family planning information, mobile phones are being used as patient monitoring devices. Mobile phones are also being used to collect community and clinical health data, for sending information to health workers, researchers and patients, and to monitor patients' vital signs.

(END/2009)