

3 ministries collaborate with WHO and the International Telecommunication Union to harness mobile technology to serve diabetic patients in Egypt

24 February 2016, Cairo, Egypt — Globally, the average person checks their phone around 85 times a day and spends one third of their waking hours using their phone. While sometimes seen as a negative dependence, modern mobile phone use in Egypt is having positive implications for health care, particularly for thousands of people living with diabetes.

On 23 February, a groundbreaking national programme “mDiabetes” was announced at a press conference held in Cairo on using mobile phones to increase people’s access to information on diabetes management.

Participants in the programme will receive regular tips via SMS on lifestyle choices and simple steps they can take to manage their diabetes. The first phase will see 10 000 diabetics receive SMS support from the programme. A second phase, later in 2016, will expand to cover a larger number of diabetic patients all over the country. It is planned in a later phase to offer messages on diabetes prevention for the general population, and a 2-way interactive SMS service where recipients can select the kind of information most relevant to their personal needs.

Current national statistics shows that around 17% of all Egyptian adults have diabetes, 10% are pre-diabetic, and over 60% of diabetics receive no treatment due to lack of awareness or lack of availability of regular checkup. This places enormous pressure on Egypt’s health care system and impacts the quality and quantity of people’s life across the country.

Egypt’s new mDiabetes programme is part of a larger portfolio of mHealth programmes for chronic noncommunicable diseases, being run jointly by a unique partnership between the Ministries of Health and Population, Communication and Information Technology and Higher Education and Scientific Research and WHO and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), known as Be He@lthy Be Mobile. This new global initiative focus on using mobile technology, in particular text messaging and apps, to help national efforts to save lives, minimize illness and disability, and reduce the social and economic burden due to noncommunicable diseases.

All messages generated by the mDiabetes programme are based on validated content from WHO global expert groups and clinical trials, and adapted for language and cultural suitability in Egypt. Examples include:

- "Being overweight or obese increases the risk of diabetes complications ... eat healthy food and walk on a daily basis"
- "Control your weight (your ideal weight = length cm-100) to help controlling your blood sugar"
- "Do not walk bare-footed and avoid using tight or open shoes. It is advisable to wear cotton socks."

The programme aims to empower diabetics to manage their condition by providing them with quality, evidence-based information and basic support. Healthy diet, regular physical activity, maintaining a normal body weight and avoiding tobacco use can prevent or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes and its complications. But people rarely understand the impact these behaviours can have on their risk of developing diabetes complications.

Mobile technology-based health and development projects (mHealth) are not new to Egypt. But the mDiabetes programme is unique due to its scale. Most countries have been limited to small-scale pilots, which limits the technology's impact and value to public health. But in Egypt, the mDiabetes programme will be capable of reaching thousands of people with the aim of expanding to millions in later phases.

The mHealth initiative is currently working with 8 other countries (Tunisia, Norway, the United Kingdom, Senegal, Zambia, Costa Rica, India and the Philippines) to develop national programmes on a range of mobile interventions in hypertension, diabetes, smoking cessation, cervical cancer and chronic obstructive lung disease. The emphasis in all the countries is on scale, with the aim on developing a common infrastructure within national health systems, which can eventually be used to support mHealth programs for any disease. For Egypt, mDiabetes is only the first step to a suite of mHealth programmes that will expand health care access and availability across the country through mobile phones.

Despite being a government-owned programme, a crucial part of the sustainability angle relies on partnership. mHealth is by nature highly multisectoral, bridging the worlds of technology, public health, policy and consumer preferences. A strong public-private partnership model lies at the base of the program's foundations. It pools expertise from various government ministries on health, information communication technologies (ICTs) and research; global partners from

the WHO-ITU initiative; and a broad array of national stakeholders, including the telecom sector and private companies with experience in health technology, promotion and service provision. Additional opportunities to join the stakeholder group will be announced shortly, and the ITU and Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population are welcoming further interim expressions of interest.

For information on how to join the programme as a stakeholder contact Karim Abdel Ghani:  
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