Health & Medicine

Somebody Text a Doctor

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A group of Columbia students is using mobile phones to improve the collection of health-care data in Malawi, where laborious paper forms make it difficult for health workers to submit field data to government officials. Health workers have found that mobile-phone text messages can transmit data quickly and accurately, thereby allowing them to better care for their patients and respond to health emergencies, such as famines.

“A lot of the information that’s written down is inaccurate and takes between three months to a year to reach the central government level,” said Mari Denby, a graduate student who is working on child nutrition surveillance in Malawi with five of her peers from the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). The group is enrolled in SIPA’s development practice workshop, which pairs groups of students with clients to work on a specific project.

Through the workshop, Denby and her classmates — Kirsten Bokenkamp, Roxana Cosmaciuc, Sean Blaschke, Beza Hailu, and Ray Short — are collaborating with client UNICEF to develop and deploy an open-source “RapidSMS,” or short message service system, which distributes mobile phones to health workers so they can instantly communicate data on child nutrition. This will allow UNICEF, the government of Malawi, and other partners to accurately map and track child nutrition trends. The students’ project won the U.S. Agency for International Development’s first Development 2.0 Challenge in January, which included a $10,000 grant.

In early 2009, several students visited Malawi to help set up the system and to train health workers to use it. Now the students are monitoring their system and advocating for better data transmission in Malawi.

UNICEF representative Christopher Fabian described the collaboration with SIPA as “a new type of partnership for UNICEF” that is generating excitement within the organization. “We’re happy to extend this. I think we can do a whole lot of

interesting things next year.”



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