The time it takes to communicate a HIV test result to a patient's health facility can be dramatically reduced by using mobile phone text messaging, according to research in a special e-health theme issue of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* (WHO), published this month.

Scientists carrying out research in Zambia found that the turnaround times for delivering a diagnosis via SMS were almost twice as fast compared to traditional postal methods. The study found that average time for a result notification from a testing lab to a health facility fell from 44.2 days to 26.7 days.

“We believe that this research signals how the processes behind testing of HIV and other illnesses can be transformed and improved through mobile phone technology, ensuring that healthcare facilities and patients are provided with their results far more quickly,” said Phil Seidenberg of Boston University, USA, one of the authors of the research which was conducted in collaboration with the Zambia Centre for Applied Health Research and Development, and the Zambian Ministry of Health.

E-health, where digital technology is used to support health systems, and m-health, where mobile phones and tablet computers are used, are seen as key to improving healthcare in the near future.

In addition to decreasing turnaround time for HIV testing, these technologies can also improve treatment, by getting people onto antiretroviral treatment (ART) earlier.

“As more people use mobile phone technology in Africa, more opportunities arise to harness e-health and m-health in support of the expansion of earlier ART for HIV, and to retain people on ART, particularly mothers and children,” said Dr Reuben Granich, Medical Officer in WHO's Department of HIV/AIDS.

UNICEF in Zambia and the researchers developed the study to address concerns that the slow transmission of test results led to critical delays in children accessing treatment. They

turned to the private sector for additional support in building the SMS system.

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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