

Query on AIDS? SMS 7827 for help

A newly devised SMS help-line in this megalopolis is becoming hugely popular with those grappling with the stigma of HIV/AIDS, having received over 25,000 texts since its launch last month.

A national initiative of the NGO Heroes Project founded by Hollywood icon Richard Gere and [Mumbai](#) socialite Parmeshwar Godrej, the help-line offers specific advice on HIV/AIDS by a panel of qualified counsellors while ensuring privacy.

It works on the Specific Query Response (SQR) system. It urges people to seek specific information about HIV/AIDS by simply sending an SMS 'ASK' to 7827.

'We understand that people are yet not comfortable to make a call on a phone help-line or may have some kind of a mental block to talking directly to a counsellor on information on HIV/AIDS,' said Heroes Project executive director Kanika Singh.

'People seeking information need a reliable source, particularly for first-level information. And this tech-friendly help-line is a welcome entrant into a society still grappling with the stigma of the dreaded virus,' Singh told IANS.

The response has been a whopping 25,000 SMSs since its launch in February.

That is hardly surprising, given that India is home to an estimated 5.2 million HIV/AIDS patients, officially second only to South Africa, though unofficially it is said to have the highest incidence of the disease in the world.

A medical counsellor with the Heroes Project said: 'Such a help-line is convenient for those who have mobile phones.'

The SMS can be sent through any mobile telephony provider and also through websites that have the SMS facility.

Elaborating on SQR technology, Singh said: 'It is an anonymous interface, a counsellor who mans the help-line round-the-clock sends a tailor-made reply to each user's SMS query within 24 hours, no matter how personal or complex the questions are.'

'The SMS help-line is a great ignorance buster and is targeted at the urban and semi-urban youngsters who shy away from seeking help. The help-line will initially run for a three-month trial period till April, and depending on the response we receive we may go into the second-level of a multi-pronged strategy for fighting HIV/AIDS.'

Experts feel that the face of HIV/AIDS interventions needs to be changed through innovation.

'Such technological innovations will definitely help build a multi-pronged strategy for fighting HIV/AIDS. It will certainly help de-stigmatise the disease over time,' said Vimla Nadkarni, dean of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences' school of social work.

But Singh admits that there is a downside to the initiative.

'There are many users who have inhibitions about their mobile numbers being flashed at the counsellors' end. We would therefore appreciate that the various mobile companies orchestrate the help-line as their corporate social responsibility and see if they can mask the caller's ID.'

The SMS help-line is part of the Heroes Project, founded by Gere and Godrej in 2004, seeking to prevent an HIV/AIDS epidemic by educating the public and reducing stigma and discrimination through a mass media campaign and societal programmes.

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