



Citizen Reporting on District Health Services

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When the village clinic in Lusikisiki failed to open because the Eastern Cape Department of Health had not paid the rent, the news was circulated on the web that very day, along with pictures of patients locked outside.

Community activist Mtshana Mvlisi had returned to the rural village from training as a citizen journalist two days before the clinic's closure in October 2012. He was able to use his new skills to write a short news report and send the report and photographs via a tablet computer to Health-e News Service, where these were edited, loaded onto the Health-e website and read by thousands of people.

Mvlisi is part of OurHealth, a small but ambitious pilot project aimed at reporting on, and ultimately improving, health conditions at district level. It was started by Health-e News Service, which has been reporting on health news for the mainstream media since 1999.

OurHealth is based in 5 of the 10 pilot districts for the National Health Insurance (NHI): OR Tambo district (Eastern Cape), Vhembe (Limpopo), Tshwane (Gauteng), Umgungundlovu (KwaZulu-Natal) and Thabo Mofutsanyane (Free State). As funding becomes available, it will be expanded to all NHI pilot districts and ultimately to as many of the country's 52 health districts as is financially feasible.

The main aims of OurHealth are to:

- expose the health issues and challenges experienced by some of the poorest, most marginalised areas of the country;
- obtain reports directly from the people who use public health facilities every day about their experiences;
- hold the district service providers accountable for conditions and services at clinics and hospitals and hold accountable the municipalities that supply services that affect health, such as water and sanitation; and
- report on inspirational people and projects that improve the health of ordinary people.

A growing body of research demonstrates that, where formal accountability such as democratic elections fails to deliver better services to poor people, collective action by or on behalf of the poor can make policy makers and service providers more responsive and accountable.

Managing editor of Health-e News Service, founder of the OurHealth project

Such collective action, defined as “social accountability”, involves current efforts by civil society groups, which include the media, to hold public officials and service providers accountable for service delivery. This accountability is achieved first through providing people with information and then “imposing reputational and political costs on providers by making state failures public”¹ through, for example, the media and public meetings. This, in turn, can “trigger formal accountability mechanisms”, which in the case of South Africa could be court action or investigations by the Public Protector and the SA Human Rights Commission.¹

International examples of how media-driven social accountability has had an impact on service delivery include India, where government responded better to floods and drought in places with good newspaper penetration, and Brazil, where radio station reports on local government candidates’ expenditure records had an effect on their re-election chances.²

Health-e’s current and sustained record of reporting on health service delivery, particularly in underreported provinces and areas, forms part of the development of a culture of social accountability in South Africa. This social accountability attempts to hold service providers accountable and to empower people both to make healthier choices and to demand the health services that they have the right to. OurHealth is taking this one step further by obtaining reports from people who live in communities and use public health facilities.

New York University Journalism Professor Jay Rosen defines citizen journalism as:

When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another.³

The Internet, combined with a rise of social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter, has enabled citizen journalists to report on a wide variety of events with relative ease and to distribute their reports widely.

In some cases, citizen journalists and bloggers that use social media have had a major impact on social events, particularly in countries where freedom of expression is suppressed and conventional media outlets are censored. The so-called “Arab Spring” or uprising, particularly in Egypt in 2011, is one example where Facebook and Twitter played an important role in mobilising and organising people against their repressive governments.⁴

While none of the OurHealth citizen journalists have a media background, they have all been active in organisations such as the Treatment Action Campaign, Black Sash and loveLife Groundbreakers and have some experience in educating and mobilising people and in dealing with local authorities. Each citizen journalist has a tablet computer on which to write their reports. They are expected to submit one story a week of about 300 words and are paid per story.

OurHealth aims to collect human stories, particularly from people in rural areas and informal settlements. These people often experience the worst services yet are least likely to have the agency to reach the media or decision makers.

Since the OurHealth pilot was launched in October 2012, the citizen journalists have reported on a number of interesting and

important stories that otherwise would have been unlikely to receive coverage or attention.

From Lusikisiki, Mtshana Mvlisi and Thandeka Vinjwa have continued to track the village clinic’s closure and the subsequent relocation of patients to a park home without water or electricity. They have also reported on conditions at Madwaleni Hospital, which had only one doctor during 2012. Mvlisi’s story on a strike at the medicine depot in Mthatha and its effect on provincial hospitals featured in national newspapers.

From Vhembe, one of the stories Surprise Nematlale followed concerned taps being without water in Matavhela and Mufulwi villages for two-and-a-half months. Her reports played a role in getting the water supply restored.

From the Free State, Thamsanqa Majola reported on the many health issues facing residents of Selahliwe informal settlement near Bethlehem as a result of poor sanitation and toilet facilities.

Selloane Molakeng reported on a five-year-old girl who had been hit by a car and died while waiting to be attended to by nurses at Phekolong Hospital in Bethlehem. Only two nurses were on duty in the casualty department and no beds were available.

From KwaZulu-Natal, Lungile Ngubane has focused mainly on organisations and people trying to improve communities around Howick in the Midlands. One example is Ethembeni Care Centre, which provides free medical assistance and distributes food parcels to people in Mpophomeni.

Edendale-based Thandiwe Mazanqinzi-Zamisa has drawn on her own experiences as an HIV-positive mother and a counsellor for HIV-positive pregnant women for her stories.

In Tshwane, Mishack Mahlangu has reported on a number of organisations in Winterveldt that face closure because they no longer receive funding from the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. These include the Winterveldt HIV/AIDs Project, which cares for 1 200 orphans, and Hope for Life, which provides antiretroviral treatment and social support to 1 200 people living with HIV.

All the stories are loaded onto the Health-e website, which has a daily average of 12 600 visitors and had an annual page-view readership of 4.6 million in 2012.

When Health-e staff members met Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi in November 2011 to discuss the OurHealth project, he was enthusiastic about it as an example of how civil society could monitor government service delivery. He asked that the citizen journalists establish contact with the Ombudsperson offices being set up in all the provinces. This, he said, would ensure that serious issues and complaints could be dealt with immediately by health officials.

Since the launch of OurHealth, the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation in The Presidency has contacted Health-e and is considering OurHealth as a pilot for citizen monitoring of government service delivery.

After three months of operating, OurHealth has a stable group of citizen reporters. It can now formalise links with district health officials and start to put pressure on them to report back on progress made to address problems identified.

OurHealth journalists will also take part in the Tendai project, a partnership that is working in 15 Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries to improve access to essential medicine. Tendai is coordinated by the Southern Africa Regional Partnership on Access to Medicines and Diagnostics, which is collaborating with the SADC Secretariat to implement its pharmaceutical business plan.

As part of the project the journalists will each be assigned to a small number of clinics and will visit the pharmacy at the clinic once a month to check on the supply of 12 essential medicines. At present, these medicines are Acyclovir, Amphotericin, Cotromoxazole, Efavirenz, Fluconazole, Lopinovir/Rotinavir, Morphine, Paracetamol, Rifampicin, Isoniazid, Tenofovir and Zinc Sulphate.

The journalists will send monthly reports to Tendai via mobile phones preloaded with a reporting template. The phones will have a geographic positioning system that captures the location and confirms that the journalists have actually visited the clinics.

The OurHealth project is currently being run on a tight budget, with support from the DG Murray Trust and The Atlantic Philanthropies. However, many possibilities exist for groundbreaking citizen reporting on health service delivery that will ensure that serious district-level grievances and successes receive the profile and attention they deserve.

References

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