

eQuest - Encouraging youth to seek their own answers to HIV

Young people, between the ages of 15 and 24, account for over half of all new HIV infections in Kenya. They are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection for physical, emotional and social reasons. Oftentimes they lack factual information about the virus, its transmission and prevention and they do not have someone to talk with about their questions and concerns. Young people are bombarded with messages to abstain or use condoms. Like other areas of their life, young people are being told what to do to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS. PATH, with funding from Elton John AIDS Foundation and Vodafone Foundation, found a way to encourage young people to seek their own answers to questions about HIV and talk about ways to keep themselves free from infection rather than just telling them what to do. eQuest was the name of this innovative approach that utilized SMS technology to engage young people in a search for life-saving answers to questions about HIV and begin an authentic dialogue with their peers and adults.

Over 260,000 young people across Kenya participated in eQuest, an SMS-based contest to increase HIV and AIDS knowledge among 15-24 year olds. eQuest, which took place from April to October 2005, was implemented by PATH with funding from the Vodafone Group Foundation through the Elton John AIDS Foundation. For eQuest, PATH used SMS technology in a new way by encouraging young Kenyans to seek and find information on HIV and AIDS.

In eQuest, participating youth competed to win prizes by finding and submitting answers to questions related to HIV and AIDS. Questions were focused on prevention, living positively with HIV, stigma, voluntary counseling and testing (VCT), and care and support. The stories were linked to youth role models and personalities in music, politics and entertainment. eQuest contestants received questions about HIV and AIDS, looked for the answers in a special weekly eQuest column in the newspaper, and then sent in their answers by SMS. eQuest was launched nationwide in April 2005 in Nairobi. The launch event allowed young people in attendance to register for eQuest for free and featured a concert with Nameless, Nonini, Jua Cali and other performers.

As part of eQuest, the country's top youth musicians, including Nonini, Bamboo, Jua Cali, Mercy Myra, Tattuu, Attitude, and Doobiez, recorded a song to bring awareness to HIV and AIDS. The song, entitled Vumilia (which means to persevere), encourages young people to think about their behaviors and their relationships in order to protect themselves against HIV. It promotes abstinence, being faithful, using condoms, and making healthy choices. CDs with the song were awarded as prizes throughout the contest and distributed to young people at eQuest events. Vumilia was played on major FM stations during the contest and can still be downloaded for free from www.path.org/vumilia.

During the eQuest contest, over 2,000 prizes were awarded to young people from all eight of Kenya's provinces, including a home theatre system, camcorders, Hi-Fi music systems, mobile phones, DVD players, digital cameras, CD discmans, scratch cards, Vumilia CDs, T-shirts, and caps. Every participant won increased knowledge of HIV and AIDS—a prize that could save their life.



eQuest poster

PATH improves the health of people around the world by advancing technologies, strengthening systems, and encouraging healthy behaviors.

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