



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

# Project ECHO: Bringing Health Care without Walls to Rural and Underserved Communities



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Some 65 million Americans live in remote, rural or poor communities where there are not enough doctors for everyone to get the care that they need, particularly specialty care.

To solve this problem, we need innovative models that bring top-quality care to people with chronic conditions, regardless of their location. We need models that promote cost-efficient partnerships between primary care and specialty care providers and the sharing of new knowledge in real time, exponentially boosting our ability to deliver specialty care to patients who otherwise would lack access.

Project ECHO is a disruptive new model of health care education and delivery supported in part by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). By bridging the gap between primary and specialty care, Project ECHO provides “health care without walls.”

## How Project ECHO Works

Using real-time learning, Project ECHO empowers primary care clinicians to safely and effectively manage patients with complex chronic conditions and spreads important new advances in medical treatment. Based at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center (UNMHSC) in Albuquerque, Project ECHO offers a new way of:

- delivering specialty care to underserved communities,
- teaching, disseminating and reinforcing best practices in care,
- providing meaningful, case-based continuing medical education to primary care clinicians and
- mobilizing the health care workforce in a public health emergency.

Project ECHO connects primary care providers with the expertise of specialists at a regional academic health center. Primary care clinicians—including physicians, nurses, physician assistants and community health workers—are organized into learning networks that meet weekly via videoconference to present cases. These “virtual grand rounds” are led by UNM specialists who review and discuss the cases with primary care providers. Web-based disease management tools facilitate consults, and specialists and primary care providers jointly manage complex chronic illness care for patients, who are treated right in their home communities.

Project ECHO’s telehealth clinics address asthma, mental illness, chronic pain, diabetes and cardiovascular risk reduction, hepatitis C, high-risk pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, occupational medicine, pediatric obesity, pediatric nutrition, rheumatology and substance abuse.

More than 1,000 doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants and community health workers have participated in Project ECHO’s telehealth clinics and trainings, and Project ECHO has performed more than 10,000 case consultations through its learning networks. In this way, many thousands of patients in New Mexico have received much-needed specialty care.

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Project ECHO's founder and director, Dr. Sanjeev Arora, is a hepatologist and leading social innovator, and was named a 2009 Ashoka Fellow. In 2007, Project ECHO was voted one of three winners from among more than 300 entries in the global Disruptive Innovations in Health and Health Care competition sponsored by RWJF and Ashoka's Changemakers.

## What Is Unique About Project ECHO?

- **New Capacities for Primary Care.** In contrast to conventional telemedicine programs that connect individual patients with individual doctors, Project ECHO simultaneously connects up to 80 primary care sites with a team of academic medical center specialists. In doing so, it quickly expands the capacity of the primary care workforce to treat more patients with serious illness in their local communities.
- **Specialist Involvement.** Project ECHO pairs case-based learning with co-management of patients by primary care providers and specialists at UNMHSC and the New Mexico Department of Health. Multiple specialists contribute to most ECHO clinics. This would not be possible in a remote or underserved area or through most conventional in-person consultations.
- **Health Information Technology.** New health information and communications technologies form the infrastructure backbone of Project ECHO, where they are applied in innovative ways. In addition to its use of telehealth technology for care management, Project ECHO has developed an electronic disease management tool to facilitate consults during virtual clinics. A database created by Project ECHO tracks patient outcomes not only to ensure quality of care but also to identify and update best practices.
- **Quality of Care.** Treatment provided through Project ECHO is as safe and effective as that provided at an academic medical center and reaches patients who don't have access to specialists. A randomized controlled trial evaluating ECHO's hepatitis C clinic showed that primary care physicians could be trained to manage the care of patients with hepatitis C and achieve outcomes identical to those of a university specialty clinic.
- **Provider Education and Satisfaction.** Project ECHO not only improves care in rural and remote locations; it has the added benefit of connecting isolated providers, delivering continuing education and improving satisfaction and retention rates in areas where it is often hardest to keep good providers.
- **Public Health Preparedness.** Project ECHO offers a rapid-response mechanism for mobilizing the health care workforce and disseminating standardized best practices in the provision of chronic illness care, as well as in a public health emergency like the 2009 H1N1 outbreak. For example, having tracked complications of patients with H1N1 influenza virus, Project ECHO immediately convened two series of teleclinics for providers across New Mexico to share newly identified best practices for antibiotic coverage of children with H1N1 and pneumonia and for ventilator treatment of hospitalized patients with H1N1 and pneumonia.

Project ECHO has received a three-year, \$5 million grant from RWJF's Pioneer Portfolio, which supports innovative ideas that may lead to breakthrough improvements in the future of health and health care. This funding aims to enhance, spread and strengthen the model within New Mexico and expand it to several new cities and states within the U.S. Currently, Project ECHO is working with the University of Washington School of Medicine to launch a hepatitis C clinic, and with a group of health centers in Chicago to improve hypertension management among African-Americans.

In addition to RWJF, Project ECHO has received funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the New Mexico Legislature, the University of New Mexico and the New Mexico Department of Health.