WORLD TELEHEALTH INITIATIVE

Goleta-based organization partners with InTouch Health and Direct Relief to provide needed medical care in developing countries

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By MARILYN MCMAHON
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More than 1 billion people cannot obtain the health services they need because those services are either inaccessible, unavailable, unaffordable or of poor quality, according to the World Health Organization.

In addition, the world faces a shortfall of more than 7.2 million health workers. Although strategies to recruit, train and develop the health workforce are improving, they are often not rapid enough to keep pace with population growth. This is compounded by difficulties in deploying health workers to rural, remote and impoverished areas.

"The United States has a doctor/population ratio of 1 to 400. On the other end of the spectrum, Malawi in Africa has a ratio of 1 to 55,500. Many developing countries have thousands of people per doctor. In these regions, millions of deaths occur every year from diseases that would easily be treated in developed countries. Many of these deaths are caused by lack of access to medicines and health care experts," said Sharon Allen, executive director of the Goleta-based World Telehealth Initiative (WTI).

Founded in 2012, the nonprofit organization wants to change all that by using telehealth technology to bring top medical experts to underserved communities all over the world where core health services would otherwise be unavailable.

"Volunteer doctors can use technology developed by InTouch Health to communicate and interact in real time with medical personnel and patients anywhere around the globe that has an internet connection," and Direct Relief is providing the medical supplies that are needed," said Ms. Allen.

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The World Telehealth Initiative, based in Goleta, is using telehealth technology to bring top medical experts to underserved communities all over the world where core health services would otherwise be unavailable. This mother and her son live in Haiti.
InTouch Health and Direct Relief to provide needed medical care in developing countries

Both InTouch Health and Direct Relief are based in Goleta. Yulun Wang, Ph.D., founder, chairman and chief innovation officer of InTouch Health, earned his doctorate in electrical and computer engineering from UCSB in 1988. Before starting InTouch, he founded Computer Motion, a Goleta-based company that was a pioneer in medical robotics.

“InTouch Health has a mock hospital on Hollister Avenue where doctors and other health care workers can be trained to use the technological tools,” said Ms. Allen. “Benefits and features include authentic visuals of the patient through audio, live video and media tools all designed for the clinical environment. Direct Relief provides logistical expertise to work with governments and NGOs to position the devices where needed.”

WTI works with physicians who donate their time and expertise to provide quality health care.

“We call them supporting physicians, and they cover a wide-ranging variety of specialties such as neurology, cardiology, infectious disease, pediatrics, orthopedics and more. A UCLA study found that doctors have a high desire to address the underserved, but due to barriers of time, money and scheduling, they are usually unable to. WTI creates a channel for them to do so from their home or office,” Ms. Allen said.

The organization is already seeing success with its pilot program at a fistula care center in Malawi.

“More than 200 women have been treated with 150 surgeries, 92 surgeries and 250 lab tests, none of which would have happened if it wasn’t for the telehealth system. The practitioner at the fistula care center is able to communicate with experts from premier medical facilities,” she said.

Ms. Allen explained that a fistula is an injury caused by abnormally long labor in childbirth.

“It is common in places like Malawi, primarily because C-sections, which would eliminate the extended labors that cause them, are mostly unavailable.”

In addition to the clinic in Malawi, WTI works with patients in hospitals in Bangladesh, Haiti and Puerto Rico, and is setting up operations in Argentina.

“We’re hoping to expand the World Health Initiative throughout the world. We have a goal of some 50 sites,” said Ms. Allen.

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