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## Bringing health care to the world



COURTESY PHOTOS

An internal medicine specialist from New Jersey, visible on the monitor, consults with a doctor in Bangladesh about a potential COVID-19 case. The communication is made possible by two Santa Barbara companies, the World Telehealth Initiative and InTouch Health.

By **BRIAN MACKLEY**  
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

**D**uring the COVID-19 pandemic, a Santa Barbara nonprofit is working to provide access to health care for vulnerable communities all over the world.

The organization, World Telehealth Initiative, is enabling doctors to help patients anywhere in the world without having to travel.

The WTI sees a major need for improvement. As of now, the World Health Organization states that half of the planet's population does not have access to essential health services and that around 40 percent of countries have fewer than 10 doctors per 10,000 people.

In contrast, according to the WTI, the U.S. doctor per patient ratio is approximately one to 380 people.

The world's lower doctor-to-patient ratio has left a deep impact. The lack of health care has led to 8.6 million treatable deaths each year, according to the WTI.

The WTI was founded in 2017 with the help of its partners at a Santa Barbara telemedicine company, InTouch Health.

Since then, the WTI has provided care for 15 developing communities around the world by using InTouch Health's innovative global cloud-based network, which allows volunteer physicians to provide care anywhere in the world from any location.

According to the WTI's news release, "WTI's telehealth technology is compatible with any medical specialty, including neurology, cardiology, infectious disease, pediatrics, orthopedics and more. The model is much more sustainable than traditional health care methods, such as

SB-based telehealth nonprofit helps most vulnerable communities during COVID-19



An expectant mother awaits safe delivery at Area 25 hospital in Malawi. This hospital is one of only a few places in the eastern African nation that provides C-sections for obstructed labors. The World Telehealth Initiative is working to improve healthcare access around the world.

medical missions (flying a doctor to a location) and video conferencing (a doctor using a potentially unreliable internet connection). Medical professionals are eager to volunteer their time and services, and WTI allows them to do so from their home or office, eliminating the typical barriers of travel, cost and safety."

The World Telehealth Initiative has highlighted the effectiveness of InTouch Health's telehealth capabilities by continuing to provide quality care around the world amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The need for what we do has never been greater. As you may have heard, telehealth has proven to be a critical tool in the fight against COVID-19," said Sharon Allen, co-founder and executive director of World Telehealth Initiative in a statement.

"It keeps providers safe while enabling them to care for patients," she said. "It allows infectious disease specialists, pulmonologists or epidemiologists to support any clinic or hospital anywhere in the

world. We are helping our partners in low-resourced settings establish isolation wards, get donated ventilators on-line, train on acute respiratory distress, provide patient care, etc."

Ms. Allen told the News-Press that when the organization first heard about the possibility of a global pandemic, "we immediately reached out to our partners and asked how we can help them and what they needed from us."

After finding out the needs of their international partners, Ms. Allen said with global resources spread thin due to COVID, there was a concern whether there would be a shortage of volunteer physicians to "help with the mission." She explained the WTI feared it would lose the progress made before COVID-19.

However, Ms. Allen said their volunteer physicians "didn't skip a beat" and that it was inspiring to see how "philanthropic our physicians are and how much they wanted to help."

## HEALTH CARE

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The WTI has helped many of its international community programs prepare for and monitor COVID-19 in a number of ways. So far, the WTI has provided patient care, helped develop intensive care units and used its connections to provide hospitals with critical ventilators needed to fight COVID-19.

In addition, Ms. Allen told the News-Press that the WTI has been able to use its relationships with infectious disease experts to connect their hospitals with “doctors that were on the frontlines” fighting COVID.

“It’s been very exciting to see the successes during a time like this,” Ms. Allen said. “There are just so many options with telehealth to connect patients with the providers that they need.”

Ms. Allen said that the WTI will continue to provide care around the world no matter the circumstance and has plans to



COURTESY PHOTO

**An emergency room doctor from the U.S., visible on the monitor, consults with a Bangladesh clinician caring for a patient with severe pain. Through telehealth, the patient was tested, diagnosed and treated.**

expand to from 15 to 40 programs within the next two years.

In addition, Dr. Yulun Wang, InTouch Health’s chairman, founder and chief innovation officer, told the News-Press that while InTouch Health goes forward with its recent merger with Teledoc Health, the WTI will

gain additional funding as part of Teledoc Health’s Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative Platform.

“I am very excited about that because it will be giving it additional life,” Dr. Wang said.

*email: [bmackley@newspress.com](mailto:bmackley@newspress.com)*