

Sharing Specialty Expertise to Enhance Primary Care: Project ECHO

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KEY POINTS:

- The ECHO model leverages technology to be a force multiplier that democratizes knowledge and amplifies the capacity to provide best-practice care for underserved people all over the world.
- Medical knowledge, which increases exponentially and is often siloed, can be effectively disseminated to primary care providers on the front lines to reduce disparities.
- Rural and underserved populations can receive best-practice care where they live by using technology to move knowledge, not people.
- Primary care provider self-efficacy in caring for various complex conditions, their sense of professional satisfaction, and their joy of work can be increased through ECHO's collaborative, tele-mentoring, community of practice.

Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) is a lifelong learning and guided practice model that improves both capacity and access to specialty care for rural and underserved populations by linking multi-disciplinary specialist teams with primary care providers in communities of practice via interactive videoconferencing. Project ECHO is a collaborative model of medical education and ongoing mentorship that empowers providers everywhere to provide better care to more people, right where they live. Developed in 2003 in Albuquerque, NM, to respond to a growing hepatitis C health crisis, Project ECHO has since expanded to include over 110 replicating partners all over the globe including 67 academic medical centers in the U.S. that use the ECHO model to address more than 55 complex conditions. The Department of Defense, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other organizations have also adopted the ECHO model to enhance access to specialty care.

Dr. Arora explained Project ECHO's hub-and-spoke knowledge-sharing networks, which are led by specialist teams who use multi-point videoconferencing to conduct virtual clinics with community providers. The clinics leverage basic, widely available teleconferencing technology that requires minimal hardware and software. During the clinics, primary care providers from multiple sites present real, de-identified patient cases to the specialist team and to each other, discuss new developments relating to their patients, and determine treatment.

Through the networks, primary care doctors, nurses, and other clinicians learn to provide excellent specialty care to patients in their own communities, and underserved populations gain access to best-practice care guided by specialized medical resources of academic medical centers. Studies have found that patient outcomes are comparable regardless of whether the patient was served by the specialist clinic or the primary care teams trained through the network. Project ECHO has expanded across diseases and specialties, across urban and rural locales, across different types of delivery services, and even across the globe.

As the ECHO model scales globally, it is helping to address some of the healthcare system's most intractable problems, including inadequate or disparate access to care, rising costs, systemic inefficiencies, and unequal or slow diffusion of best practices.

[VIDEO: Project ECHO](#)

[SLIDES: Project ECHO](#)