

Project ECHO: An Innovative Teaching Tool

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A revolution is occurring in the delivery of continuing education to healthcare professionals. The objective of Project ECHO (Extension of Community Healthcare Outcomes), based at the University of New Mexico, is to create a virtual community of practice through which practitioners build expertise of a certain condition through regular consultation with a specialty team as well as a network of colleagues (<http://echo.unm.edu/about-echo/>). Project ECHO was created by Sanjeev Arora, MD in an effort to address a significant shortage of physicians trained to treat Hepatitis C in New Mexico. Through weekly case consultation and didactic presentations, Dr. Arora and an interprofessional team co-manage complex patients among rural providers. Outcomes from the Hepatitis C ECHO reveal that treatment response rates were as successful for ECHO-trained providers as for those receiving care at an academic medical institution (Aurora et al., 2011). Currently, the model has been replicated for more than 45 conditions through 90 expert hub teams in 15 countries and counting.

The ECHO model is particularly impactful in rural and frontier areas, where access to specialized care is often scarce and typically requires travel to medical centers many hours away. Severe weather events, geographically isolated communities, and the financial burden of travel all influence one's access to healthcare. Clinically speaking, access to geriatric specialists is particularly challenging. Many areas face a shortage of geriatric specialists in most healthcare disciplines, especially in rural areas. An expanding number of geriatric ECHO clinics hope to improve access to specialists in geriatrics, while increasing competency of practicing healthcare professionals in remote areas.

In addition to the clinical importance of the ECHO model, the potential for Project ECHO as a teaching tool is significant. Participation in ECHO clinics either via live online attendance or through archived recorded sessions can be incorporated into courses at all levels of training. This provides students the opportunity to participate in interprofessional case discussions that provide rich examples of interprofessional team dynamics as well as a myriad of clinical issues for discussion and further investigation. With ECHO clinics on more than 45 complex conditions, the application to undergraduate, graduate, and health professional education is vast.

A recent course at the University of Wyoming College of Health Science incorporated live participation in the UW ECHO in Geriatrics. Students stated that this was a very

useful class activity and recommended that all health science students have the opportunity to participate in an ECHO early in training, rather than only as continuing education once in the field. Research indicates that practitioners who are earlier in their careers may be more likely to utilize the Project ECHO training model to increase competency in treating complex conditions. Pindyck, Kalishman, Flatow-Trujillo and Thornton (2015) reported that participants who were in the first five years of clinical practice were more likely to treat hepatitis C patients with the support of the Hepatitis C Virus ECHO (HCV ECHO) for Indian Health Service providers than clinicians in practice for longer periods of time. Today's students and trainees are comfortable with the internet and technology, making their participation in ECHO clinics a natural fit. Geriatric ECHOs provide a way to increase access to care and competency in treating older adults, and are a promising avenue for increasing student and trainee interest in and exposure to geriatrics.

Currently there are multiple ECHO clinics that focus on geriatrics in the United States, many of which are funded through the Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program awards through the Health Resources and Services Administration. In addition to the aforementioned University of Wyoming ECHO in Geriatrics, other geriatric ECHO networks include the University of Washington Northwest Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Center Project ECHO – Geriatrics, the University of Rochester ECHOs in Geriatric Mental Health for Primary Care and Geriatric Mental Health for Long Term Care, the University of Chicago Geriatric ECHO, ECHO Hawaii's Geriatric Care ECHO Clinic, the University of Nevada Geriatric ECHO Clinic, and Harvard ECHO-AGE. The topic of Project ECHO as a teaching tool will be explored in more detail at the AGHE Annual Meeting in Miami, March 9-12, 2017.

To learn more about the Project ECHO visit <http://echo.unm.edu/>

To learn more about the UW ECHO in Geriatrics visit <http://www.uwyo.edu/wycoa/>

References

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