

# PROJECT ECHO<sup>®</sup>: ACCELERATING COLLECTIVE WISDOM



## Empowering Frontline Healthcare Providers to Care for Underserved Populations with Complex Chronic Conditions

**A**s a global health care company, Merck & Co., Inc., Kenilworth, NJ, USA, known as MSD outside the United States and Canada, has an important responsibility to increase access to its medicines and vaccines. The company is committed to help reduce the burden of disease around the world and is contributing to progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – the international community’s plan of action to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change by 2030. To date, the company’s Foundation has invested more than \$47 million toward SDG 3 [Good Health and Wellbeing] through programs that seek to reduce health disparities and improve access to high-quality care for patients with Alzheimer’s, cancer, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

The Foundation is supporting Project ECHO<sup>®</sup> (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) and its innovative efforts to help underserved populations with complex chronic conditions gain better access to specialty care. Through a \$7 million grant over five years (2017-2021), the Foundation is helping Project ECHO<sup>®</sup> replicate its work in India and Vietnam.

## Challenges in Receiving Specialty Care in India and Vietnam

In many countries, including India and Vietnam, specialized health care is only available in major hospitals, making it challenging for many patients to obtain the care they need for chronic conditions such as mental illness, tuberculosis, HIV, hepatitis C, and diabetes.<sup>1</sup> In remote and rural areas, much of the health care workforce is composed of primary care providers, community health workers, and other grassroots health networks that focus mainly on basic primary care.<sup>2</sup> Because there are so few specialists, patients often travel long distances to receive care, experience lengthy waiting times before receiving treatment, and may be charged prohibitive fees for health care services.

## Project ECHO: Providing the Right Care at the Right Place and the Right Time

Project ECHO<sup>®</sup> expands access to preventive and specialty care for rural and underserved urban populations by building the capacity of primary care physicians and community health workers to provide safe and effective care for complex and chronic conditions. Through telementoring and guided practice, the ECHO model<sup>™</sup> is a cost-efficient solution to reduce disparities in health outcomes.

The core components of the ECHO model<sup>™</sup> are based on the philosophy of “all teach and all learn” and include:

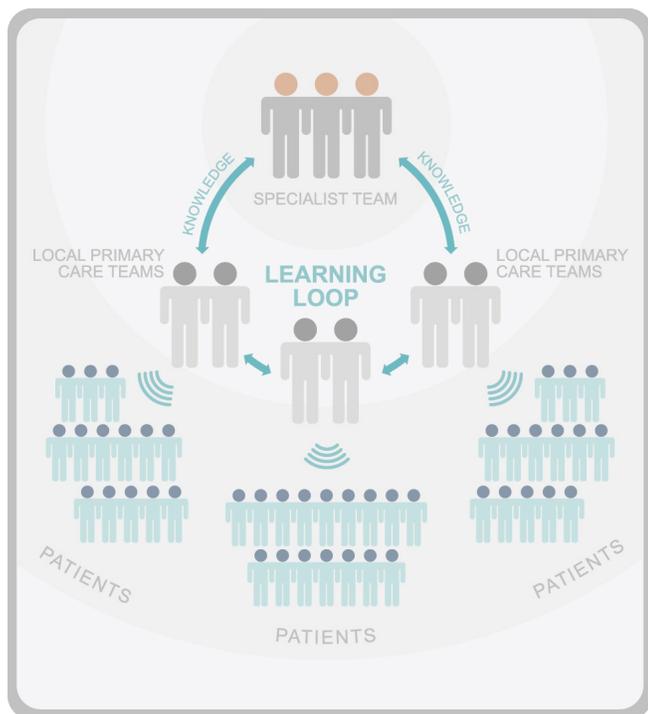
1. A virtual “hub and spokes” knowledge-sharing network to reach health care providers in remote and resource-limited communities
2. Disseminating to frontline health workers best practices in delivering high-quality care and reducing disparities in access to care
3. Supporting primary care physicians in providing care for complex and chronic conditions through collaborative case-based learning and guided practice
4. Evaluating and monitoring outcomes to assess impact and make improvements

<sup>1</sup>World Health Organization. Global Atlas of the Health Workforce <http://www.who.int/workforcealliance/knowledge/resources/hrhglobalatlas/en/>, accessed 22 October 2018.

<sup>2</sup>World Health Organization. “Regional strategy on strengthening health workforce education and training in South-East Asia Region (2014-2019).” (2015). <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/160761/1/SEA-HSD-379.pdf>.

## THE ECHO MODEL™ IN ACTION

Project ECHO® links multidisciplinary medical specialist teams at an academic hub with multiple primary care providers on the frontlines through teleECHO™ programs around the world. The experts mentor and share their expertise via case-based learning and train local providers to treat patients with complex conditions.



**Source:** Project ECHO® ([https://echo.unm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ECHO\\_One-Pager\\_11.17.16.pdf](https://echo.unm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ECHO_One-Pager_11.17.16.pdf))

Project ECHO® also partners with governments at the state and national levels to launch networks in regional academic hospitals. Once the telementoring network is in place, the Project ECHO® team provides initial technical support and guidance to ensure successful implementation. As the project matures and demonstrates effectiveness, Project ECHO® shifts responsibility for staffing and implementation to local organizations supported by state and national governments or donor agencies.

The ECHO model™ is currently being implemented in 33 countries, leveraging the expertise of more than 200 academic and tertiary care centers to mentor local health providers and expand the range of services they can provide to patients.

## ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP

The Foundation's partnership with Project ECHO® is facilitating the scale-up of operations from one hub in New Delhi to 17 hubs (10 of which are government-run) and 29 teleECHO™ programs across India. The hubs (specialty teams at academic medical centers or other care centers) provide specialized training in hepatitis C, tuberculosis, HIV, mental health, cardiology, oncology, and other diseases. Several hubs are also developing training programs for community health workers to further expand access to appropriate treatment and care. A recently established India superhub (regional training center) is building the capacity of new hubs in the region through training and technical assistance.

Because of the model's demonstrated success, Project ECHO® has been incorporated into India's Revised National Tuberculosis Control Programme guidelines for Programmatic Management of Tuberculosis, increasing the potential for continued expansion in India.

Additionally, Project ECHO® is laying the groundwork for replicating the model in Vietnam, with 17 partnerships already underway.

### Advancing Best Practices

Project ECHO® is evaluating the impact of its hub and spokes model in improving access to best-practice specialty care for patients – particularly those with complex or chronic conditions – in rural and underserved areas in India (and soon in Vietnam). The evaluation will aid in the continued improvement and replication of the ECHO model™ in these two countries and around the world.