



## WHEN YOU SOLVE ONE PROBLEM, *you create another.*

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# Rule of Life #486

### **ringing telemedicine to Turkey, Texas followed just such a rule.**

Prior to the implementation of telemedicine in 1999, the residents of Turkey and Quitaque, a neighboring community just off the Caprock of Texas, drove 90 miles roundtrip to go see a doctor. It had been that way for years.

Turkey, Texas is a rural, agriculture-based community, with a population of 500 in the city limits and a couple hundred more scattered about the area. The small community has a strong musical heritage with monthly Jamborees where area musicians are invited to come and play, a community theater, and even Bob Wills' Day to honor their most famous musician.

"Turkey was a bustling town at one time, with three grocery stores, 11 gas stations, two dry goods stores and a dry cleaners," says Pat Carson, the mayor. "But like a lot of West Texas towns that faced significant decline in the 1970s, it has struggled to hold its own for the last 20 years."

Holding its own did not include local health care services. And this lack of health care became a serious issue to the community as its population aged, and people weren't interested in retiring in Turkey. The lifestyle was great — the music, the atmosphere, the friends. But without access to health care, people were choosing to retire to Plainview or Childress or Lubbock.

In 1999, Dr. Sid Ontai, a physician in Plainview, after traveling or sending mid-level providers to Turkey to provide on-site care in the community — decided to incorporate telemedicine technology to see patients in Turkey and Quitaque.

Community leaders were optimistic about the opportunity to have more ready access to care and joined their resources with Ontai to set up the technology. A health care clinic was established in the same building that houses the Bob Wills Museum and City Hall.

Ontai realized very quickly that using telemedicine for patients to visit the doctor over distance did not address the full scope of the health care need in those communities. Patients still had to drive long distances to go to a pharmacy to get their medications.

## Turkey, Texas

Ontai approached **Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC)** about opportunities to overcome that barrier to care. Texas Tech had developed one of the first telemedicine systems in the nation back in the early 1990s and is considered to be one of the leaders in the field. The Health Sciences Center also had a School of Pharmacy, with the clinical expertise to develop and evaluate a remote pharmacy system that maintained high quality patient-pharmacist interactions.

The idea was interesting, but there were many obstacles — including working through the legislative process to make telepharmacy services allowable under a state law enacted in 2001 and then to set up the administrative rules to develop a framework for how telepharmacies would operate.

After months of planning, developing the technology and drug formulary, the first telepharmacy project in Texas became a reality in September 2002 through partnerships between the TTUHSC School of Pharmacy; the TTUHSC Office of Rural and Community Health; a private physician in rural Plainview; the community of Turkey; Health Care Visions, Inc., a private telemedicine equipment company; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Residents in Turkey stop by the clinic and Don Turner, the EMT-

presenter links to Dr. Ontai's office in Plainview for the consultation. Dr. Ontai writes a prescription as needed. Turner then links to the Texas Tech pharmacy located in Lubbock, so that a pharmacist can review the prescription, counsel the patient and oversee the remote dispensing of pre-packaged medications, which are available on-site based on a pre-set formulary.

If a prescribed medication is not available through the formulary, the Lubbock pharmacy then mails out the prescription following the telepharmacy patient counseling session.

“For our community, telepharmacy was the big deal,” says Carson.

“Without it, you still had to drive an hour each way to get medication. A lot of the older folks in town don't have any transportation to get to Plainview or Childress for their medications — unless they have family or friends who can drive them. The health clinic is within walking distance from anywhere in town.”

In the two years that the telepharmacy services have been available,

more than 1,100 prescriptions have been filled and patient satisfaction has been very high.

“Most everyone is pretty pleased. Of course, it is a different setup. When you spend 40 years driving an hour to go to the doctor and waiting in the waiting room and then seeing the doctor or walking into the pharmacy and standing at the counter — it's a little different to walk in



Dr. Sid Ontai, Don Turner, a TTUHSC pharmacy student and Charlene Randell participate in the first telepharmacy consultation in Texas on September 18, 2002.



The Bob Wills Center serves as the hub of activity in Turkey, Texas — home to city hall, the library and the medical clinic.

and sit down in front of a computer screen,” adds Carson.

“People are realizing that they are getting the same kind of care that they do face-to-face — they're just cutting out the hour drive and hour wait in the waiting room.”