

**Use of a teledentistry partnership program to reach a rural pediatric population**

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Corresponding Author: Tara E. Schafer • 1430 John Wesley Gilbert Drive, Augusta, GA 30912 • (706) 721-7190 • [tschafer@augusta.edu](mailto:tschafer@augusta.edu)**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Teledentistry is “the practice of using video-conferencing technologies to diagnose and provide advice about treatment over a distance.” Teledentistry has been defined as “the practice of using video-conferencing technologies to diagnose and provide advice about treatment over a distance.” This report describes the partnership of two rural Georgia public health districts. Augusta University Dental College of Georgia’s Department of Pediatric Dentistry partnered with a private practice dentist in Georgia with the goal of increasing access to care.

**Methods:** A partnership was created that allowed dentists in a remote location to triage dental patients seen in a school-based clinic.

**Results:** Over 3500 children were treated in a school-based dental clinic over a five year period and triaged for referral for further treatment via a teledentistry link.

**Conclusions:** Teledentistry provides an option to reach rural populations for whom access to dental care is an issue.

**Key words:** Teledentistry, rural health initiative

<https://doi.org/10.21633/jgpha.6.311>

**INTRODUCTION**

Teledentistry has been defined as “the practice of using video-conferencing technologies to diagnose and provide advice about treatment over a distance” (Chen 2003). According to a resolution of the House of Delegates of the American Dental Association in 2015, it can take many forms, including live video, which could allow for two-way interaction between a patient and a dentist using technology; the secure transmission of patient information such as radiographs to a practitioner who evaluates the patient remotely; remote monitoring of patients for whom access to care is an issue; or healthcare supported by mobile communication devices such as cell phones or tablets. Teledentistry can be an effective way for dental personnel to be supervised by a dentist in a remote location, thus extending care to underserved patient populations and helping to ease the shortage of dental providers (ADA News 2017).

The Southeast District Health Department (SEHD) began providing telemedicine services in 1994, and since then it has been a leader among Georgia’s public health districts in developing and providing clinical telemedicine services to its residents. Telehealth services began with a linkage between the Ware County Health Department and the Medical College of Georgia. Services have evolved to include the formation, in March 2000, of the Southeast Telehealth Network to expand telehealth services throughout the region. In September 2000, the SEHD received funding to expand telehealth activities to more

counties within its service area. The Augusta University (AU) School of Dentistry has supported SEHD since the inception of the pilot program. Over the course of the program, providers from the school have overseen the work of several hygienists in assisting thousands of children and providing dental consultation and education. For complicated or extensive cases, the facility serves as a pediatric referral site for network members and the state of Georgia in general.

The Teledentistry Program is a partnership of two rural Georgia public health districts (SEHD and South Central Health District (SCHD)), AU Dental College of Georgia’s Department of Pediatric Dentistry, and a private practice dentist in Ware County, Georgia. The mission of the network is to provide a system of care to meet the oral health needs of individuals living in South Georgia. The network has created a means of access to oral health care for pediatric patients that was lacking in this part of the state. Network members, established by contract, consist primarily of dental providers, dental schools, and public health providers. This is due to state laws that allow only public health hygienists to practice teledental services under remote supervision of a dentist.

The teledentistry clinics in Brantley, Charlton, and Clinch counties are single-county Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (DHPSAs) in rural southeastern Georgia. These clinics are set up in elementary schools, where schedules are created to minimize time out of the classroom. Dental hygienists provide cleaning, fluoride, radiographs,



