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*Building a Healthy New Mexico!*

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## **Innovative project wins first place in international competition**

(Santa Fe) -- Project ECHO, an innovative program of the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center and New Mexico's Health and Corrections departments, won first place in an international competition designed to identify programs that change the way medicine is practiced. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation chose the New Mexico project out of 307 entrants from 27 countries.

UNM Health Sciences Center, and the departments of Health and Corrections developed Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) in 2003 to respond to a community need for Hepatitis C services. The project uses teleconferences, telemedicine and the internet to help providers throughout the state care for patients suffering from the disease.

"We have invested in telemedicine because it is an essential component of improving access to health care for our rural residents," said Governor Bill Richardson. "UNM and state government brought together providers from across New Mexico, so patients can receive specialty care without leaving their communities."

Dr. Sanjeev Arora, project director and executive vice chairman for the Department of Medicine at the UNM Health Sciences Center, said the goal of the project is to bring specialty care to patients living in rural areas who do not have access to specialists. More than 34,000 people in New Mexico are infected with Hepatitis C and 40 percent are uninsured. Arora said many patients live in remote rural and underserved communities with no access to treatment.

"There is a knowledge explosion in medicine today and it's very hard for primary care doctors in rural areas to keep up to date with the latest innovations," Arora said. "With Project ECHO we can form partnerships for better healthcare for New Mexicans."

The key component of the ECHO model is an innovation called a Knowledge Network in which the expertise of a single specialist is shared with several primary healthcare providers, each of whom sees numerous patients. Since June 2004 the project has conducted 205 Hepatitis C Knowledge Network clinics and provided 2,316 consultations for patients.

"The flow of information in a Knowledge Network is not unidirectional; the specialist and community-based primary care providers gain invaluable feedback and case-based experience through weekly consultations," Arora said.

Project Echo focuses on how patients can stay healthy regardless of whether they receive treatment.

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“This project overcomes the barriers of distance and income to increase access to specialty medicine for our border and rural residents,” said Health Secretary Dr. Alfredo Vigil. “The model is successful because we have great collaboration among our partners in the program.”

Statewide partners also include the New Mexico Primary Care Association and Indian Health Services.