

FRI-407

Elevating liver disease management in Egypt: A Project ECHO® experience

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Background and aims: Chronic Hepatitis C infection (CHC) continues to be a major health burden in Egypt, with almost 10% of the general population affected. Despite efforts on eradicating CHC in Egypt, there are limited resources. Patients still suffer from complications of liver disease and a complex of health conditions, especially those living in underserved areas. "Project ECHO® [Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes] is a movement to demonopolize knowledge and amplify the capacity to provide best practice care for underserved people all over the world. The ECHO model™ is committed to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable populations by equipping communities with the right knowledge, at the right place, at the right time." https://echo.unm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ECHO_One-Pager_07.24.2018.pdf Using videoconferencing, International Liver Centers Foundation (ILCF) in Southern California replicated the ECHO Model™ with clinicians and researchers in Egypt. The goals of the ILCF-Egypt ECHO® are to guide Egyptian clinicians in the management of CHC and its complications, connect clinicians practicing in major cities in Egypt with those in rural areas and link senior practitioners with their junior peers.

Method: ILCF-Egypt ECHO® started in October 2017 with 3 clinicians (spokes) from Alexandria. The spokes are practicing at community hospitals in Alexandria and independent clinics in the surrounding communities. Sessions are held bi-monthly. A typical session lasts 2 hours and consists of 5 case presentations and a 20-minute didactic given by ILCF or an invited expert (Hub). Case presentations are sent in advance in a de-identified standard format with pertinent medical information. Each case presentation is followed by a discussion between the spokes and Hub. The Hub then forwards its final recommendations to the spoke.

Results: Initially, our focus was on Alexandria and its surroundings. The number of spokes steadily grew. Case presentations were focused on complicated cases of CHC. Currently, based on the spokes' requests, the majority of the cases and didactics are on other aetiologies of liver disease (see figure). The spokes and Hub also developed collaborative research projects including a 23-case report of leptospirosis.

Conclusion: ILCF-Egypt Project ECHO®: 1) is successful in connecting GI/Transplant Hepatology experts in the U.S. with clinicians in Egypt offering them world-class mentoring that would not otherwise be easily accessible; 2) addresses the void of guidance on unique, rare and complex cases; 3) provides linkages between senior and junior clinicians as well as those serving in cities and their counterparts in underserved communities in Egypt. This will ultimately provide better access to much-needed specialized healthcare especially to those in underserved communities.

Figure:

