

Low-cost telemedicine in Iraq: an analysis of referrals in the first 15 months.

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The Swinfen Charitable Trust (SCT) uses simple email telemedicine links to connect remote hospitals in the developing world with expert medical opinion and advice. It uses an email routing system to automate much of the message-handling.[1,2] Some of the countries utilizing these links, such as Iraq, are passing through conflict and post-conflict situations. In March 2004, the SCT established telemedicine links in four hospitals in Iraq, located in Baghdad, Basrah, Erbil and Dohuk. Following word of mouth and a variety of conference presentations on the SCT, many more hospitals in Iraq have requested registration. There are now 25 hospitals registered in the system. During the first 15 months of operation, there were 140 telemedicine cases referred to the SCT from 20 of those hospitals. The advice requested has been in a wide variety of specialty and subspecialty areas, the most common being neurology, orthopaedics and surgery. Due to the unreliable nature of power and telecommunications in post-conflict areas there have been problems with some of these links. Most are operating successfully on email, but two, in Baghdad, have had teething troubles mainly due to faulty telecommunications. One hospital at Al Hillah closed temporarily for repairs to its operating theatres following a car bomb. Despite the difficulties experienced by the hospitals in Iraq they have continued to send referrals through the system, with four hospitals sending 50% of the referrals.

References

1 Wootton R. Design and implementation of an automatic message-routing system for low-cost telemedicine. *J Telemed Telecare* 2003; 9 (suppl 1): 44-7;

2 Swinfen P, Swinfen R, Youngberry K, Wootton R. A review of the first year's experience with an automatic message-routing system for low-cost telemedicine. *J Telemed Telecare* 2003; 9 (suppl 2): 63-5