

Sharing Cancer Care Information Across VA Health Care Systems

Julie R. Beck, RN, MSN, Mph, APRN-BC; and Pradeep Mutalik, MD

A telementoring program based on the Specialty Care Access Network Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes model shared information about cancer care across VA health Care systems.

In 2016, the Cancer Care Coordinator at the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Connecticut Healthcare System (VACT) in West Haven partnered with the VA New England Healthcare System to use its telementoring program. The VA Specialty Care Access Network Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes (VA ECHO) was used to present a series of educational conferences on cancer care. This article describes our experience implementing the program and reviews participant feedback gathered from voluntary surveys.

BACKGROUND

In 2011, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Healthcare Transformation launched VA ECHO, a telementoring program for primary care providers (PCPs) and patient-aligned care team staff. VACT was selected as 1 of 7 hub sites across the US. The VA ECHO system uses video and online technology to provide PCPs with case-based specialist consultation and didactic education. The system enables providers at any VA location to participate in online and telephone conferences in real time. The presentations are recorded and made available online to VA providers through a secure site.

VA ECHO is based on the highly successful Project ECHO model established by Sanjeev Arora and the University of New Mexico in 2007.¹ The rationale for Project ECHO was that patient care could be improved by increasing the competence of PCPs in the management of complex diseases by providing access to disease specialists through a case-based learning approach that used technology, which it termed *knowledge networks*, to connect the PCPs to specialists.

The original model addressed management of hepatitis C in a medically underserved area where half of the population was widely geographically dispersed, making the provision of specialty care challenging. Developers identified

6 characteristics that make a disease appropriate for treatment using the Project ECHO knowledge network model:

- The disease is common;
- Management of the disease is complex;
- Treatment for the disease is evolving;
- The disease has a high societal impact;
- There are serious outcomes if the disease is not treated; and
- Disease management improves outcomes.¹

VA ECHO conferences are available to all VA personnel. Staff can subscribe to an e-mail group list to be alerted to conference times and topics. Participants can connect directly to the conference using Microsoft Outlook Lync or Skype (Redmond, WA) and see the slides in real time on their computer as they listen to the presentation. The presentations are recorded, and the slides with audio can be accessed easily on the VA ECHO SharePoint site for download, enabling VA staff to listen to conferences at their convenience (Figure).

VA CANCER ECHO

The impetus to create a series of talks related to cancer care using VA ECHO was the frequent and often time-consuming requests we received from colleagues at other VA sites for information about areas of cancer care, such as survivorship and cancer care coordination. It was felt that presenting cancer care information as a VA ECHO series would make this information available to a large group of providers at one time, making the method more time effective than sharing the information via one-on-one conversations.

The cancer care coordinator originally conceived this as a 3-part, 1-time series to present work done at VACT in the areas of survivorship, psychosocial distress monitoring, and coordination of cancer care using the VA Cancer Care Tracking System, an online tracking tool. Information about the series was disseminated via VA

Julie Beck is an Oncology Nurse Practitioner at VA Connecticut Healthcare System in West Haven, and **Pradeep Mutalik** is the Program Manager for the VISN 1 Connecticut VA ECHO Program.
Correspondence: Julie Beck (julie.beck@va.gov)

FIGURE
VA ECHO SharePoint Site Homepage



group e-mail lists for oncology providers and via the existing VA ECHO subscriber invitation process. The 3-presentation series garnered positive feedback and had attendance that ranged from 49 to 75 participants (mean, 60). Participants expressed enthusiasm for the format via e-mail and phone feedback directly to the West Haven staff.

Expansion

The success of this original 3-part series led to a trial of an ongoing Cancer Care Conference series (Conference) using VA ECHO. This was a novel use of VA ECHO and was outside its traditional format, which is geared to discussion of individual cases and clinical knowledge. Nevertheless, this new style of communication has been embraced by a wide range of VA cancer care professionals.

One reason we considered expanding the program was that oncology fit the framework of the original Project ECHO knowledge network model. Cancer is common at the VA, which cares for 175,000 patients with cancer annually.² The management of cancer is complex involving many disciplines working together, and treatments are constantly changing. In addition, cancer has a high societal impact; there are serious outcomes both in terms of patient survival and patient symptom burden. And lastly, outcomes are improved with proactive disease management that is informed by the most current, evidence-based medicine.

The Conference was conceived as a forum for providers across disciplines to share best practices and discuss common challenges in caring for veterans with cancer. We invited participants to submit proposals for presentations

related to cancer care initiatives at their VA sites. Potential speakers across all areas of care for veterans with cancer were invited to submit possible topics for the conference. The submissions were reviewed by the moderators in an effort to create a series of talks on a variety of topics across all aspects of care for oncology patients in the VA. This process of effectively crowd-sourcing educational content inspires providers to think more creatively about their practice and quality improvement projects and has sparked an ongoing dialogue about quality initiatives among VA oncology providers across disciplines and geographic locations. As a result, this approach also has enabled participants to learn from colleagues who work at a wide range of rural and urban VA locations throughout the country and to network with colleagues who are working on similar quality initiatives and challenges related to caring for veterans with cancer.

Program

The first Conference talk was in October 2016. It encompassed ten 1-hour talks during the 2016 to 2017 academic year. Speakers were recruited from the VACT West Haven campus and from several other VA sites nationwide. Topics included survivorship, psychosocial distress, palliative care, cancer navigation, and establishing a clinical trials program.

In its first year, the Conference series had 260 unique attendees representing such disciplines as medicine, nursing, social work, pharmacy, psychology, and clinic administration and representing all 21 Veterans Integrated Services Networks (VISNs). Speakers including oncologists, hepatologists, cancer care coordinators, health psychologists, and a research coordinator gave presentations on psychosocial distress screening and issues, cognitive behavioral therapy for cancer pain, cancer navigation, cancer case tracking, VISN-based liver cancer tumor tracker and liver tumor board, starting a VA-based clinical trial, palliative care, and survivorship.

The Conference accounted for 508 continuing medical education (CME) hours, which accounted for one-third of the total CME hours generated by the VACT West Haven VA ECHO program. Highlights of the talks were presented at the 2017 Association of VA Hematology/Oncology annual meeting in Denver, Colorado.

During the second year of the Conference, speakers were recruited to address new Ameri-

can College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer (CoC) requirements regarding survivorship treatment summaries for a subset of cancer survivors.³ The focus on survivorship was driven by ongoing feedback from participants who were working on initiatives to implement this process at their VA sites and wanted to learn from peers involved in this process throughout the VA system. Several speakers gave talks on implementing survivorship care at their VA and specifically on the use of computerized patient record system templates to create survivorship treatment summaries for veterans in accordance with CoC standards.

Since the first Conference in 2016, the number of unique attendees grew by 20% to 327 in 2018. During its first 2 years, participants have earned a total of 1,095 CME credits through Yale University CME. Conferences are usually broadcast at noon eastern time so that providers can take advantage of sessions during lunch breaks.

PARTICIPANT SURVEYS

Attendees were invited to participate in voluntary, anonymous surveys to obtain feedback on and to receive input on topics of interest for future talks. Participants also were asked to comment on resources that they utilized to be updated on practice changes (Table 1). Web-based VA conferences such as VA ECHO were cited by > 50% of the survey participants as a resource. Survey participants were most interested in presentations on case management, coordinating cancer care, and learning how to use technology to improve cancer care, survivorship, palliative care, clinical trials, and oncology pharmacology.

The Conference has led to increased awareness of other continuing education opportunities available through VA ECHO-Connecticut. Of survey participants, 20% reported that they had attended other VA ECHO conferences.

The survey samples are self-selecting and may not necessarily be representative of the Conference participants or of the VA oncology interdisciplinary team as a whole; however, the relatively large number of survey participants provides some confidence that these survey results can help inform future planning for this and other continuing education opportunities for VA oncology providers.

An additional online survey was designed to elucidate whether participants were incorporating knowledge gained from the Conference in

TABLE 1

Primary Sources of Oncology Care Information (N=95)^a

Primary Sources of Information	No. (%)
VA CE (eg, ECHO)	53 (56)
uptodate.com	42 (44)
CE through societies (eg, Oncology Nursing Society)	37 (39)
Online resources (eg, VA oncology field advisory committee)	41 (43)
Consult a colleague in person	34 (36)
Consult a colleague via e-mail/group lists	32 (34)

Abbreviations: CE, continuing education; ECHO, specialty care access network extension for community healthcare outcomes; VA, US Department of Veterans Affairs.

^aParticipants could check more than one response.

their cancer care practice. Half of the 32 participants strongly agreed with the following statement: "Participation in the VA Cancer Care Conference has added to my knowledge of information relevant to my practice," and 13 more agreed with the statement for a total of 90.6% of those surveyed responding affirmatively. Only 3 participants neither agreed nor disagreed, and none disagreed with the statement. More than half of the participants reported that they made changes to their practice or plan to make changes as a result of the Conference.

CONCLUSION

The VA ECHO program established at the VACT West Haven campus in 2012 now offers regular monthly or bimonthly conferences in 9 specialties: pain, liver/hepatitis C, neurology, nephrology, cardiology, diabetes/endocrinology, mental health and addiction, nursing grand rounds, and cancer care. The VACT ECHO program is led by a medical director, and each specialty has a clinical director who conducts sessions and recruits other specialists from their department.

Teleconferencing can provide opportunities for colleagues living in distant locations to connect; share best practices, common goals, and challenges; and initiate ongoing and lasting relationships. The Conference draws the most diverse audience by discipline of all the VA ECHO conferences hosted at VACT (Table 2). While this is a relatively large conference with participation ranging from 50 to > 80 individuals for each talk, > 40% of survey participants reported that they have established relationships with new

TABLE 2
Survey Participation

Professions	Survey Responses, No. (%)	
	2017	2018
Nurse	19 (27.5)	25 (27.2)
PA or APRN	11 (15.9)	12 (13.0)
Medical doctor	9 (13.0)	8 (8.7)
Case management	8 (11.6)	10 (10.9)
Social worker	3 (4.4)	4 (4.4)
Pharmacy	1 (1.5)	0
Administration	4 (5.8)	5 (5.4)
Other	14 (20.3)	28 (30.4)
Total	69	92

Abbreviations: APRN, advanced practice registered nurse; PA, physician assistant.

colleagues through the Conference. The Conference has broken out of the narrow clinical model traditionally addressed by VA ECHO technology and has expanded it to a variety of new topics and subject areas of interest to a diverse audience of VA personnel.

Traditionally, the national VA ECHO program has been a forum for specialists to discuss clinical case presentations for the benefit of primary care providers and to deliver didactics about chronic clinical conditions. Our Cancer Care Management VA ECHO has explored new ground by discussing material that has helped sites set up and enhance cancer care clinics and disseminate best practices for cancer survivorship and other aspects of cancer care. As a result, this conference has attracted and provided a forum for the most diverse audience of staff among VA ECHO clinics, with participation from clinic administrators to social workers to primary care providers to tumor registrars.

Through the creation of the Conference, > 300 individuals who care for veterans with cancer have been provided with a regular forum at which to connect with colleagues, receive updates on new treatment options for their patients, and learn about and share best practices specific to VA oncology patients. The VA ECHO technology creates a resource that can be accessed by all VA staff from their desktop computer. The VA ECHO SharePoint saves the slides

of the Conference presentations both with and without audio to enable staff who can't participate in real time to access the information at their convenience.

The Conference has facilitated networking among VA oncology providers who have common interests. Conference participants also have participated in other VA ECHO conferences in disciplines beyond oncology. Participants in the Conference also are encouraged to participate as speakers by presenting quality improvement initiatives at their VA site. This novel approach to generating content for this educational series has led to a dynamic interchange of ideas and increased networking among VA providers related to their practice and quality improvement initiatives at their VA sites. The Conference provides a regular forum for VA staff across a wide range of disciplines to share personal experiences, successes, and frustrations and to get feedback from colleagues.

The Conference combines a structured approach to presenting VA-specific educational content related to cancer care and multiple mechanisms that encourage staff to participate in an ongoing dialogue related to quality initiatives both on the phone during the Conference, online using Outlook LYNC or Skype to ask questions during the Conference, and during conversations on group e-mail. The Conference promotes staff engagement at little or no extra cost to the VA. For more information about the VA ECHO Cancer Care Conference or to submit a presentation for consideration for a future session, please contact julie.beck@va.gov or pradeep.mutalik@va.gov.

Author disclosures

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Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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