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Dr. Steve North has raised nearly \$1 million to rig rural schools with cyber doctor's offices, saving families hassle and money and keeping students healthy and in school. Here, he test-runs the new equipment with his son Eli, 6, while a school nurse observes remotely.

## Virtual Medicine

Through the innovative use of an everyday technology, physician Steve North is revolutionizing the way rural residents receive health care. Now a doctor's visit is just a webcam away

BY LEAH FABEL (CHICAGO '01)

**T**welve-year-old Victor Rousseau lives in the tiny town of Bakersville, N.C., where from his front stoop the Blue Ridge Mountains invite countless adventures—and a few misadventures. He came home one day last spring complaining of a wicked itch on his hands and face, with a bright red rash creeping toward his eyes.

A visit to the doctor's office was out of the question. Mitchell County has 220 square miles of steep hills, thick forests, and breathtaking views, but only a handful of physicians and barely one bar of cell-phone reception. Last-minute doctor appointments are nearly impossible to arrange, and there are no

urgent-care clinics.

"It would've been an emergency room visit" to the county's one hospital, says Tamara Rousseau, Victor's mother. "Even for something as simple as a common cold or an earache, a lot of people around here wind up at the emergency room because it's the simplest option."

Instead, a new technology saved Victor hours of discomfort, and his mom hours of time and a hefty insurance bill from a trip to the ER. He trotted down to his school nurse's office, where she flipped on a TV screen rigged with \$25,000 of equipment. Dr. Steve North (E.N.C. '93), a towering man with a

gentle Midwestern bearing, appeared on the screen from a school-based clinic at Buladean Elementary School, 13 winding miles away. He asked Victor to hold to his face a small tool shaped like a pen and fitted with a webcam.

"Yep, Vic, you've got poison ivy. See?" North said, flipping a switch so that Victor could see the pesky rash magnified on screen. And that was that. A virtual visit, an easy diagnosis, an e-prescription to the nearest pharmacy, and Victor was back in class.

School-based telemedicine is the latest solution to providing rural health care, and North has become the go-to guy for making it work. In an effort to provide medical care for all 4,500 students in Mitchell and neighboring Yancey County, North secured more than \$800,000 in federal, state, and private funding for the MY Health-e-Schools network, which operates like a regular clinic out of three school nurse offices, but with remote doctors and high-tech equipment. With the help of Bluetooth-enabled stethoscopes and otoscopes, and

## ADVOCATE

a nurse's steady hand, North can listen to a child's heartbeat or examine her ear canal from his office miles away.

He first learned about the technology while earning a master's degree in public health at the University of Rochester. In 2006, the Wisconsin native landed in his wife's native Mitchell County, and by the close of the 2012-13 school year, his telemedicine network will operate in 14 of the county's 16 schools, serving 4,000 students. Its genesis, though, came two decades earlier and about 300 miles across the state in Edgecombe County, where North taught fifth through eighth grade special education.

One of his students, Jessie, came to class with a clear case of pink eye. North offered to take him to the doctor. When he stopped by his home—an old sharecropper's shack—his mother asked if North could take Jessie's sisters, too—one older, one younger.

"We arrived at the doctor's office in this town with a pretty mean history of segregation, and here I was, this young white guy with an attractive young

African American woman and two other kids. We waited, and we waited, and we waited. And when they finally called the kids' names, they made sure to ask very loudly if they had their Medicaid cards," he says, still flinching at the treatment. "I realized it's about access, access, access. And respect for the patients."

Today, calls come in faster than North can respond from doctors across the country hoping to replicate his work. He wears a wrist brace to ease the aggravation brought on by hours of emailing, texting, and grant-writing.

But even with the convenience of telemedicine, the root of the problem remains the same: There simply aren't enough health care providers opting to work in rural communities.

"The need for access to mental-health services is huge," North says. "We have two therapists in Mitchell County, and there are no child and adolescent psychologists or psychiatrists, so I end up doing a lot of mental-health stuff." The telemedicine set-up allows North to link to a psychiatrist in Asheville, about an hour southwest, but demand

far outpaces available appointments.

"And dentition—oh yeah, the need for dentists is enormous," North adds, the "oh yeah" a reminder of his Northern upbringing, the son of a small-town doctor. "I see 3-year-olds needing sedated dental care. Kids miss school all the time for need of a simple extraction—that's a huge problem."

So in addition to his work with patients, North is also developing a project with Mitchell High School to connect the school-based clinics with brand-new health-science teaching facilities.

"We want to work with rural kids and support an interest in health-related careers, so that they'll come back and work in a rural community," he says.

One of his first protégés might be Victor Rousseau, now itch-free and more keenly aware of forest greenery.

"Vic was amazed—it's nice to get diagnosed, but also to see what the technology can do," his mother says. "He hears me talking about the need for doctors, and he sees where the future is going, and that inspires him." ★



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