Access to healthcare for people in low- and middle-income countries is challenging. Patients in remote areas of Ghana face geographical barriers to health services – including poor transport networks, limited access to healthcare providers, and inadequately resourced health facilities – and experience high mortality and morbidity rates for diseases that may be easily treated. For patients in the Bonsaaso cluster in the Amansie-West District of the Ashanti Region, traveling to access medical services and consultation could be as far as 40 kilometers.

**Project objectives**

The goal of the original pilot project was to expand access to quality care for populations in remote rural areas, reducing transport times and costs for patients, and avoiding unnecessary referrals. The model was developed around the frontline health worker, with digital technology allowing for the centralization of healthcare expertise. In 2015, the program was scaled to the entire Amansie-West district and extended to cover three additional regions (Central, Volta and Upper East). This year telemedicine has continued to scale to four additional districts in the Eastern Region, and will initiate scaling in the Greater Accra region. Given the program’s success, the Novartis Foundation is currently working with Ghana’s Ministry of Health to develop a roadmap for national scale up of telemedicine by 2017.

**How it works**

Higher training healthcare professionals such as doctors, experienced nurses and midwives provide coaching and guidance to community health workers based in rural, remote areas in their patient care. Access to these higher trained health professional through a 24 hour teleconsultation center not only empowers community health workers, but it also improves quality of care with a direct impact on patient health outcomes through reducing unnecessary referrals and allowing for immediate support in the event of medical emergencies. Operations are being monitored in order to extract and evaluate lessons learned. Best practices from the project will inform future Ghana healthcare strategies, particularly as the Ministry of Health looks to scale up telemedicine services across the country. The project was launched in cooperation with the Columbia University Earth Institute’s Millennium Promise, the Ghanaian Ministry of Health, National Health Insurance Authority and Ambulance Services of Ghana, and Ghana Health Services.

**Facts & Figures**

- The Telemedicine Pilot Project covered 6 Millennium Villages and 30 communities in Bonsaaso Cluster, home to 32,000 people.
- In the pilot stage, 54% of all teleconsultations were resolved directly by phone, including 31% avoided referrals in 2013.
- Preliminary analysis of research shows an average of 46 calls per month.
- The main condition was obstetrics and gynecology (30%).
- Fever was the second main condition reported at 17%.
- Currently in scale-up, 16 districts in 4 regions are now covered by telemedicine with an estimated population of 1.5 million.