

Virtual Healing

Gary Selnow, PhD



Courtesy of WiRED

Doctors and medical students in Baghdad access electronic libraries at WiRED International's Medical Information Center at Medical City Center, the largest medical school and teaching hospital in Iraq.

A San Francisco organization is helping Iraqi doctors recover from 20 years of isolation and censorship under Saddam Hussein, using computer technology and the Internet to give Iraq's medical schools quick access to current technical knowledge, electronic research libraries, and video connections with U.S. medical educators.



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Twenty years of censorship in Iraq effectively isolated Iraqi doctors from advances in medicine. Saddam Hussein blocked e-mail and Internet communication, banned travel to professional conferences, and cut off access to medical journals and textbooks. The result is that Iraqi medicine, once among the best in the world, has become among the least informed anywhere.

This became evident soon after our small group from WiRED International, a nongovernmental organization that pioneered computer-based medical information programs after the Balkan Wars in 1997, entered Iraq on the heels of the coalition forces in 2003. Sponsored by the U.S. State Department, we looked at how we might use information technology to help Iraqi medical schools obtain quick access to current technical information. An American technician and I joined with Iraqi doctors and technicians to install electronic libraries in Baghdad-area teaching hospitals. In a single day, we converted empty rooms into research libraries called Medical Information Centers (MIC).

An MIC is a collection of interconnected computers that draws technical material from two sources. Where satellite connections are available, MICs provide access to the Internet's rich online resources at the world's leading medical schools and research institutes, the World Health Organization, and U.S. government health agencies. These are valuable databases for any user, but in places where medical journals are few and far between, and where textbooks are older than some medical students, the Internet is a brimming source of technical knowledge.

Where the Internet is not available, or unaffordable, WiRED stocks electronic libraries with as many public-access journals, texts, and research papers as we can load onto a computer hard drive. Each MIC is then outfitted with this stand-alone library that can be used without an Internet connection.

WiRED installed the first four MICs in Baghdad in June 2003, and by June 2006 we had set up 39 of these centers at hospitals across Iraq.

We recently augmented the MICs with videoconferencing equipment at medical schools in Baghdad, Basrah, Erbil, and Mosul. These systems provide direct, high-speed audiovisual communications between Iraqi and American physicians for lectures, seminars, and patient assessments. WiRED's consortium partners at Children's National Medical Center in Washington,

D.C., the University of California-San Francisco Medical School, and San Francisco State University College of Nursing provide most of the medical content. This is the only program in Iraq providing Iraqi medical educators with direct links to the outside medical community. These electronic telemedicine bridges, along with the MICs, give Iraqi doctors a chance to break the isolation they've suffered for so many years.

Understanding the potential outcomes of this program is why WiRED treasures words like these from Dr. Kahalid N. Mayah of the Basrah Teaching Hospital: "WiRED may be the best thing done for Iraq. Many nonprofits came to Iraq, some stayed, some went, but your effort to make Iraqi doctors enter to the world of scientific research and information systems was the best thing done."

All of us at WiRED are volunteers. We hope that our work in Iraq, as in all the countries we serve, demonstrates the abiding goodwill of the American people. WiRED seeks to unite medical communities around the world through improved communication. We believe that a universal quest for good health can become the tie that joins us together. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.



A satellite links doctors at San Francisco State University in California and the Medical Information Center in Baghdad.