
PITT'S BUSINESS OF HUMANITY® PROJECT'S TUVAR HEALTH & WELLNESS CENTER CONTINUES OPERATIONS DURING COVID-19

As COVID-19 continues to spread across the globe, the ability to manage the pandemic in remote parts of our inter-connected world presents an urgent challenge. To help address this challenge, the Business of Humanity® Project* (BoH) at the University of Pittsburgh, led by the Katz Graduate School of Business and the Swanson School of Engineering, has been working with its partners at the Apollo Telemedicine Networking Foundation (ATNF), Safe World Rural Services (SRS), and Narottam Lal Bhai Rural Development Fund (NLRDF) to assist its Tuvar Health & Wellness Center located in Gujarat, India to continue to operate under new and ever-changing circumstances during this pandemic.

The Tuvar Health & Wellness Center (THWC), designed and funded by BoH, offers a unique combination of health care and digital services to a community that lacked basic amenities, including power. The BoH Project aims to empower individuals and communities across the world to improve, sustainably, the quality of their lives by providing them with access to healthcare, electricity, potable and running water, sanitation facilities, internet, and government services, built on an economic foundation of education and employment opportunities.

THWC has been in operation for 16 months, delivering technology-enabled healthcare and digital services. The services provided by THWC include teleconsultations, a diagnostic laboratory, a pharmacy, an internet-enabled Common Services Center, and outreach and healthcare and wellness programs including Health Profiling, health education and menstrual hygiene projects for school children, and Social Health Education (SHE) sessions. In March 2020, the THWC reached 382 beneficiaries, bringing the overall number covered to over 8,000.

Before the lockdown went into effect in India, ATNF created and distributed a COVID-19 information packet written in the local language as well as in English. Since the lockdown in India took effect, individuals specifically located in rural and remote areas have been facing challenges in accessing regular health care services and our partners at ATNF have been working to clarify misinformation regarding COVID-19 so that individuals would feel safe visiting the THWC. In accordance with the lockdown guidelines issued by the Government of India, the THWC reopened on April 20th, 2020 and has been continuing to provide health care services to rural communities in and around Tuvar. The details outlined below by ATNF demonstrate the unique challenges that COVID-19 are presenting to the health care workers at THWC and the steps they are taking so that individuals in rural and remote areas are provided with quality care.

The unique partnership that has been cultivated between Pitt's BoH Project, ATNF, SRS and NLRDF responds to the necessity, during global crises, that we work together across time zones and national boundaries.

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TUVAR HEALTH & WELLNESS CENTER COVID-19 PREPAREDNESS NOTE

1. The COVID-19 Challenge:

COVID-19 has evolved to become a major challenge as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). In addition, to enforcing stringent restrictions like social distancing and home isolation, the pandemic has burdened already stressed health systems, especially in developing countries like India. Since the declaration of a lockdown in India, individuals specifically located in rural and remote areas have been facing challenges in accessing regular health care services. Moreover, with the dissemination of myths and misinformation regarding COVID-19, individuals have been reluctant to visit healthcare facilities to avail services. Amidst this situation, the Tuvar Health & Wellness Center (THWC) reopened on April 20th, 2020 and has been continuing to provide health care services to rural communities in and around Tuvar. In accordance with the lockdown guidelines provided by the Government of India, services have been initiated in a phased manner.

- *Stringent national lockdown declared in India on March 23rd, 2020.*
- *Tuvar Health & Wellness Center shutdown from March 24th to April 19th, 2020.*
- *Activation of outreach services compromised by applicable lockdown restrictions.*



- *Home quarantine of THWC team.*
- *Strict policing requiring clearance at multiple check posts.*
- *Transport of PPE for THWC team challenged by lockdown restrictions.*



2. COVID-19 Challenges @ THWC:

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the way health care services are being provided at THWC. The THWC team had to be home quarantined after the declaration of the first lockdown on March 23rd, 2020. The THWC had to be shut down as only selected Government health facilities were allowed to provide health care services with all other health care facilities, including private health facilities, ordered to shut down. It was only after the relaxation for private health care facilities during the third lockdown phase that THWC was reopened. Furthermore, the lockdown restrictions complicated travel of THWC team to the center, as team members had to clear at least 10 police check posts to reach the center. After reopening the THWC, the team had to display their ID cards and explain the purpose of their visit in detail to obtain clearance from the police authorities. In addition, Government of India (GoI) published guidelines for operating healthcare facilities, which included strict physical distancing and sanitizing the center after a patient visit. The timely transport of PPE for protection of THWC team during the lockdown was another major challenge.

3. Mitigating COVID-19 Challenges @ THWC:

The THWC was reopened only after the GoI relaxed lockdown restrictions for non-government healthcare facilities. The team was instructed and trained about the mandatory physical distancing and sanitizing procedures to be followed at the center. Guidelines were developed for triaging patients based on a questionnaire provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) to identify patients at risk for COVID-19. Patients meeting the COVID-19 triaging criteria were referred to the nearest COVID-19 public health facilities. However, once the communities were informed that treatment for COVID-19 would only be provided at public health facilities designated by the Government, individuals with COVID-19 symptoms stopped visiting THWC. PPE for THWC team were delivered in time through a tedious process of obtaining clearances from Government. Non-contact thermometers for measuring the temperature of visiting patients have been provided to further assess patients with fever for COVID-19.

- *Systematic implementation of evidence-based guidelines.*
- *Timely supply of PPE to THWC team at the center.*
- *Training and orientation of THWC team*
- *Triaging of patients with COVID-19 symptoms.*
- *Providing health care services.*



April & May 2020:

- *Teleconsultations- 45.*
- *Laboratory tests- 21.*
- *CSC services- 42.*
- *Pharmacy services- 47.*
- *Menstrual hygiene session beneficiaries- 16.*



4. Service Delivery @ THWC during COVID-19:

The health care services at THWC are slowly but steadily returning to full potential. In the month of April 2020, only services available at the center were provided and outreach-based activities like Health Profiling, SHE, menstrual health sessions, and community awareness were put on hold. However, with the relaxation of lockdown restrictions in May 2020, outreach activities have been partly initiated in communities where COVID-19 is not prevalent. In addition, menstrual hygiene sessions and free delivery of menstrual kits are being carried out at the THWC.



5. Conclusion:

The COVID-19 pandemic is posing a lot of uncertainties and combined with the guidelines being frequently revised by the Government, the situation is highly unpredictable. However, THWC is adapting to the ever-changing scenarios and innovating service delivery by adhering to published guidelines in order to provide the much-needed health care services for the remote and tribal communities in and around Tuvar.