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Reaching out to rural Central America

Memorial's expertise in distance technology is an essential part of a \$4 million CIDA-funded project to promote primary health care nursing in Nicaragua and Guatemala .

The Centre for Nursing Studies is working with the Telehealth and Education Technology Resource Agency (TETRA) to reach students living and working in rural parts of these two countries. Perry Ward , co-ordinator of Technical Services at TETRA, has made about 10 visits to the two countries over the past few years to do site assessments and train technicians to use the equipment for distance education.

"I have to evaluate every aspect of where the technology will reside. This includes everything from telecommunications/carriers to the internal electrical supply. Even the dust, humidity and heat will cause problems, it can get up to 45 degrees. I have to test equipment for the conditions and train technicians so that they become self sufficient. We think that our weather is unpredictable here – I have never seen such violent rains or lightning storms in my life! While we will never control the weather, we put contingencies in place so the equipment is 'best' protected."

Mr. Ward said the technology most suitable for rural and remote Central America at this present time is the Telewriter technology, something TETRA recently moved away from in Newfoundland in favour of Web-based education.

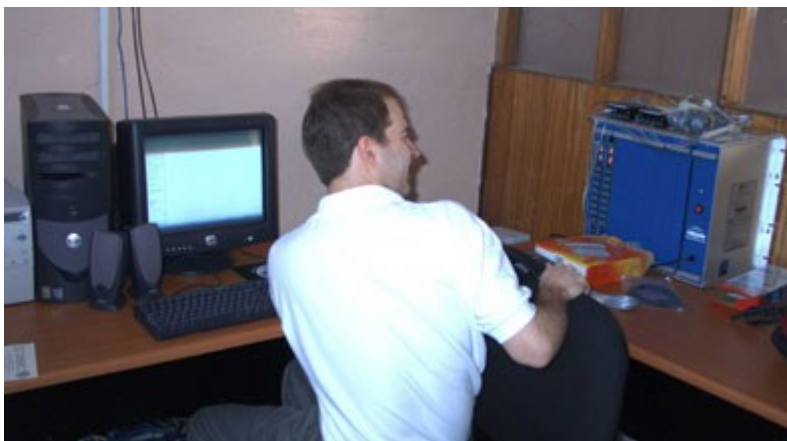
"But in rural Nicaragua and rural Guatemala there isn't the reliable infrastructure for computer technology in the rural areas – sometimes even in this day and age it's difficult to get a phone line in a community.

Telecommunications providers will only invest in larger areas of economic interest where they will get a return on their investment. It's simple business. We are using a combination of standard and VSAT telephone lines. What we do is supplement audio with pre-stored text pages which can be transmitted over an ordinary phone line so as the teacher is teaching the text will appear at the far end on a standard computer monitor. It's fully interactive, students can write back and forth. We are really surprised how far they have come in short a short period of time."

Viola Duff, international project coordinator with the Centre for Nursing Studies (CNS), initiated the projects in Central America . She and her husband had lived in that part of the world for several years and when she joined the faculty of the CNS she realized that the technology used for distance education in Newfoundland and Labrador would easily work in Central America .

The first project, now completed, saw a post-RN program delivered in Nicaragua through three sites. The current regional project is a one-year course in health promotion for rural workers. "This is for auxiliary nurses who come in at entry level with anything from Grade 9 to 12."

Ms. Duff said the CNS works closely with the governments of Guatemala and Nicaragua to see what programs fit with their plans. The idea behind the health promotion course is to train people with a



In Guatemala , Perry Ward of Memorial's TETRA configures a 72-port Audioconferencing Bridge which allows all the students from across the county to join and to fully interact with other peers in their class. It was something that was remotely impossible in the past.

vested interest in staying in their home communities.

Mr. Ward said he is constantly amazed at the level of dedication shown by the rural students. "I remember one individual in Guatemala who left home at 4 a.m. for an 11 a.m. class and got there by hitchhiking, biking and riding on donkey for six to seven hours. And it was the same journey to get back home! I delighted to say that he now only has to travel an hour to get to class."

In Nicaragua , 21 community health leaders have completed a 10-month course using the technology appropriate to their needs. In Guatemala , 40 students are staying in or near their communities and receiving nursing courses through distance technology. The course content is developed and taught by teachers in the home country. TETRA and CNS has provided them with the tools they need so that auxiliary nurses are able to provide a better level of health care in their communities. Mr. Ward said he is amazed with the level of dedication and how well the technicians and other staff he has trained have learned to run and maintain the equipment. "I very seldom get a call."