

# Connecting

## PATIENTS TO CARE

The video screen shows a man's face, and the picture is startlingly clear. With just a touch, the camera can center on his eye or zoom in to focus on his hand.

In South Carolina, sophisticated technology like this has changed the way mental health crises are handled in hospital emergency rooms across the state. The unique system uses telemedicine to link 20 hospitals to each other and to psychiatrists, even though they may be miles apart.

"Through telemedicine, we're helping emergency departments in all reaches of the state provide timely consultations and crisis stabilization," says Dr. K.D. Weeks, the Trustee who leads The Duke Endowment's Committee on Health Care. "Instead of waiting days, patients can receive a consultation within hours."

The idea for the network took root through collaboration among the Endowment, the South Carolina Department of Mental Health and the South Carolina Hospital Association. Many people experiencing a mental health crisis were waiting in a crowded emergency room longer than necessary because psychiatric help wasn't available. Through telepsychiatry, the emergency room physician and the consulting psychiatrist can determine if patients may be safely discharged and referred to treatment, or if hospitalization is needed.

Leaders launched the South Carolina network at Baptist Easley Hospital in Easley in 2009. Since then, the system — which is now a national model — has provided 14,500 consultations. Five full-time Department of Mental Health psychiatrists offer services 16 hours a day, seven days a week.



In South Carolina, Drs. Brenda Ratliff and Frank Clark believe telepsychiatry is the new frontier in connecting patients in crisis with the services they need.