

It was the early 2000s and our young family had moved to Kenya, where a brilliant Canadian scientist's discovery offered a potential cure for AIDS. A group of sex workers in Nairobi were found to be immune to the HIV virus. Dr. Richard Lester, co-captain of our family, was joining the research mission to help find the cure. Simultaneously, the World Health Organization (WHO) was responding to one of the greatest public health crises the world had ever seen, and so they set the mandate known as three by five: 3 million people on AntiRetroViral (ARV) medication by 2005. This was the atmosphere as our family entered a new chapter, and where the WelTel story began.

While contributing to the science being led by the Universities of Nairobi and Manitoba, Dr. Lester noticed that almost everyone coming to the clinic had a cell phone. Africa had pretty much leapfrogged over legacy technology like landlines, and many Kenyans were proficient users of texting long before Canadian fingers were tapping the tiny keypads on their mobile phones. At the same time, more than 60% of people

initiating ARV therapy were being lost to follow-up within six months; the AIDS virus was mutating as a result, requiring stronger treatments, causing more deaths, and leaving more children orphaned.

The situation was dire, and called for a creative solution. Why not use cellphones to engage people in their care? And so, WelTel Kenya¹ was born: the world's first research to demonstrate how 2-way text messaging could improve health outcomes and save lives. Patients who were supported using WelTel were more likely to be engaged in their own care and adhere to their medication, which meant that they were unable to transmit the virus. This promised to be a game changer. And it was. Published in *The Lancet*, one of the world's most prestigious medical journals, WelTel became a star overnight.

Launched as a research project, the WelTel concept was imagined with a vision to change the way health care is delivered around the world. Since our humble beginnings in 2004, we have continued to do world-



Gabby Serafini and Richard Lester

In early 2021, the BCPVPA launched a partnership with Vancouver-based WelTel for a pilot project to support member well-being, tracking the day-to-day well-being status of 100 participating members through a text-based messaging system.

In the words of BCPVPA Executive Director Kevin Reimer, "I've been part of a pilot with WelTel, and when I receive the text, I do pause and consider: '*How am I?*' So far, I have been able to answer, '*I am fine,*' but being able to stop and consider that question in my day has been very valuable."

We asked WelTel CEO Gabby Serafini to share the story of this innovative approach to supporting well-being.

How are things going?

I'm good!

Fine!

I still have a fever

Can we video chat?

Not okay.

Doing great.



thanks for the check-in

by
Gabby Serafini
CEO, WelTel



Gabby Serafini and the Kenya team

leading research to show what works in digital health. With a business ethos that is committed to ensuring no person is left behind, we have strived to build a sustainable business using a social enterprise lens. Today, WelTel has a footprint in several countries and is known as one of the most evidence-based digital health platforms in the world, with more than 75 publications in the world's most influential journals.

Starting with focus groups that included both patients and providers, WelTel was designed using a grassroots approach to ensure that it would be person-centred and relevant. After more than 15 years of experience and iterative development, we have found that regardless of why people enroll in WelTel, they feel cared for and supported, better able to self-manage, and more engaged in their

"Launched as a research project, the WelTel concept was imagined with a vision to change the way health care is delivered around the world."

care journey. Youth and adults alike have said that WelTel improves their wellbeing through meaningful communications that build trust and empowerment. Providers who use WelTel feel more connected to their patients/clients and have reported higher job satisfaction. Establishing connections between

people and their known care providers builds trust and strengthens relationships, crucial ingredients for improving health outcomes.

Through WelTel's use of open, natural language and an iterative, evidence-based design process, we have developed, tested, and proven an outreach communication protocol that embraces intentional messaging for meaningful outcomes and delivers value at every stage of the care journey.

You are probably wondering how the BCPVA formed a partnership with a digital health company that began as a research project in Kenya. As a huge supporter of the public education system and a mother of three, I am passionate about our schools and those who formulate the right recipe for a meaningful educational journey. Societal demands for excellence seem to permeate every facet of our children's lived experience. The expectation of educators to produce high-achieving, productive citizens is equally present. We have seen anxiety and mental health issues continue to escalate as the years have passed, much of this burden being taken on by educators and administrators, creating a cycle of ever-increasing demands that result in burnout.

It was 2019 and there was plenty of media feeding on school issues. The news was full of discussions about bullying, racism, anxiety, and the mental health crisis across the nation. A friend said, "Wouldn't it be great if every student could have access to WelTel? If someone was sending them the simple message — 'How are you?' — how might that impact their lived experience?"

Realizing that WelTel had a solution that could be of benefit, I reached out to David DeRosa, at that time the President of the BCPVPA. We sipped coffee while meandering through WelTel's journey. I saw the wheels turning and knew at that moment that he understood the extraordinary power of the 'ask don't tell' approach. David believed that three simple words might save a life, and that conversation led to more discussions when David introduced me to BCPVPA's Executive Director Kevin Reimer.

When meeting Kevin, I was envisioning WelTel as a mental health support tool in the schools that would

"Establishing connections
between people and their
known care providers
builds trust
and strengthens
relationships, crucial
ingredients for improving
health outcomes. "

connect students to their counsellors. Kevin's focus darted straight to the members, and his vision of connecting with them in innovative ways that were discreet and meaningful. We cannot begin to imagine the pressures felt by the leaders of our educational institutions, the Principals, Vice-Principals, and so many others expected to ensure seamless operations in the face of natural disaster and pandemic alike. Kevin's plan was methodical and fine-tuned; he knew exactly who the right players were to pull it off and soon looped in Rochelle Morandini, a brilliant and innovative thinker who understands human engagement better than any person I know. We strategized the approach collectively before being interrupted by the pandemic, but nothing was going to bring us down. We were like the Three Musketeers — fully committed to seeing this idea come to fruition — and in May of 2021, the WelTel-BCPVPA pilot project was launched.

This is how it went down. Kevin emailed members asking if they would like to participate in the WelTel Wellness Check-in Pilot. Interested members signed up through a Google intake form sharing their name, mobile phone number, position (Principal or Vice-Principal) and school district. This is the simplistic beauty of WelTel: once enrolled, people are connected via their mobile phones to their known care team. Members receive a weekly check-in message by text at an appropriate time that asks quite simply 'How are you?'. Members can respond, using open natural language, in any language, and with anything of concern. Algorithms categorize their responses

the program valuable, and research has shown that asking someone ‘How are you?’ encourages them to self-reflect and report back in a way that facilitates meaningful dialogue, self-management, and an increased sense of well-being. Those triaging the responses report feeling more connected to their community through this low-touch and powerful communication modality.

It has been a true honour to work with the BCPVPA these past months, and humbling to learn more about the great services provided to our communities by the members. Educators and school leaders alike are helping to build a nation of critical thinkers and self-starters. With such a task in hand, no wonder these three simple words have had such an impact.

