

CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY



BIG SUR HEALTH CENTER

AN ISLAND OF HOPE ON THE CALIFORNIA COAST

The Challenge

The stretch of Central California where the Santa Lucia Mountains rise sharply from the Pacific is sparsely inhabited and known for its beauty and natural disasters. Big Sur Health Center stands alone in providing care to residents. Because of frequent threats from wildfires, landslides, and earthquakes, staff recognized they needed a cloud-based healthcare IT solution for care delivery.

The Solution

Big Sur Health Center selected eClinicalWorks in 2009 to maximize protection of and access to patient data. That decision paid off in the winter of 2016-17, when landslides and bridge collapses left the community isolated. eClinicalWorks and a well-coordinated response throughout the community ensured patients got the medications and reassurance they needed.

The Results

Big Sur's providers used cloud-based access to patient records to handle patient requests, ordered medications through local pharmacies, and had those medications delivered by helicopter to stranded residents. The coordination and caring that got the health center and community through the crisis is typical of a community used to being tested and prevailing.

Big Sur Health Center

An Island of Hope on the California Coast



Brita Bruemmer, MD,
Medical Director

A Land of Beauty and Danger

South of the Monterey Peninsula on California's Central Coast is one of the most beautiful and rugged places in

America — Big Sur. Here, where the Santa Lucia Mountains rise abruptly out of the ocean to meet sequoias and live oaks, generations have sought solitude and spiritual solace, while marveling at the beauty and might of the Pacific.

From Carmel-by-the-Sea to the north to Cambria in the south, there is a single road, U.S. Route 1. And for that 100-mile stretch, the only medical facility is the Big Sur Health Center, which was begun in the fall of 1979 in the kitchen of the local Grange hall.

For all its natural splendor, Big Sur is also a land of danger. Wildfires regularly scour the landscape. Torrential rains cause mudslides. Earthquakes are a constant threat.

From Carmel-by-the-Sea to the north to Cambria in the south, there is a single road, U.S. Route 1. And for that 100-mile stretch, the only medical facility is the Big Sur Health Center, which was begun in the fall of 1979 in the kitchen of the local Grange hall.

"They would wheel in curtains to shield the patients from the windows, and a doctor would come down from town one day a week, and people would just line up to be seen," said Executive Director Sharen Carey.

Demand grew. A temporary building was put up in 1985, replaced by the current health center in 2004. And a facility that once served 200 patients a year now sees about 3,500 annually — and growing.



Sharen Carey, PA-C,
Executive Director

Building a True Community

From the start, providers and staff at Big Sur Health Center sought to create a community that provides as many medical services as

possible, from primary and preventive care to urgent care, dental services, and even acupuncture and chiropractic.

"We do men's care, women's care, all children's exams and care," Carey said. "We do gynecology, dermatology. We do EKGs. If we have something that's really beyond our scope, we have specialists that we can send our patients to. But we try to do everything that we can right here."

The health center even bought a washer/dryer and medications, blankets, and cots, so as to be prepared for emergencies, or simply to offer assistance to hitchhikers who often get caught in storms as they pass through.

"We've had them change their clothes, wrap in a blanket, and sit in our waiting room," Carey said.

The staff at Big Sur are aware of what Mother Nature can do, and have a history of ensuring continuity in patient records and services. Following the 2008 Basin Complex Fire, which forced them to pack records into boxes for a potential evacuation, they realized it was time for an Electronic Health Record system.

“We’ll give them a cup of hot soup and we’ll do their laundry, and that way we can send them away with dry clothes and some warm food.”

A Wary Eye on Nature

The staff at Big Sur are aware of what Mother Nature can do, and have a history of ensuring continuity in patient records and services. Following the 2008 Basin Complex Fire, which forced them to pack records into boxes for a potential evacuation, they realized it was time for an EHR. So, Carey called upon a friend, who recommended eClinicalWorks.

“It brought a huge advantage for us, because we’re a small office, we have multiple personnel,” Carey said. “One of our providers lives on the peninsula, and she may not like to stay here until 8 o’clock at night doing records. She can leave, go home and have dinner with her family, then she can get on the cloud from home and access the records and continue to work.”

A Winter With No Bridges

In the winter of 2016-17, disaster struck.

“We had an enormous amount of rain in a short amount of time, so there were a lot of mudslides,” said Dr. Brita Bruemmer, Medical Director. “One day in February I was on my way to work and got stopped because a pole had come down. There was a lot of mud running, and eventually I couldn’t get to work because they were not able to open that road. And then

we had no power and therefore no Internet, no phone, no water pump. The office was completely closed for about a week.”

Next, the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge to the south began to sag, and was closed. Mudslides cut off other roads. Residents found themselves stranded on the “Big Sur Island.” It would be months before all the roads and bridges would be restored.

A Critical Need for Medication

“I live in Monterey, where I had perfectly good access to power,” Dr. Bruemmer said, “and I was able to use the cloud to access patient charts and the answering service, which is also off-site, and was able to get phone calls from patients.”

One resident in need of immediate assistance was Michelle Provost, whose father has needed medication since a stroke in 2011.



The collapse of the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge, mud slides, and road closures cut off access to Big Sur, stranding residents and making emergency services difficult to impossible. Big Sur Health Center arranged to fly in medications by helicopter.

“We would have been in trouble figuring out how to get him to the hospital to treat any condition that would have arisen due to his not having his medication,” Provost said. “So, he was in dire need of that.”

Big Sur Health Center staff were

able to access patient records, authorize the medication, and have it delivered.

“They were able to bring our medication by helicopter, sometimes by car, and a couple of times by walking!” Provost said. “I’m just thankful that the health center is here for us every day. It’s a wonderful feeling to know that you’re secure in your healthcare.”

Caring for a Cat Bite

One day, Dr. Bruemmer received a call about Linda Jones, a longtime Big Sur patient who had tried to comfort her cat while it was having a seizure.

“When an animal is frothing at the mouth, you want to just kind of stay away from it, but I went to comfort her, to soothe her, put a towel over her, and she bit me pretty deep,” Jones said. “I can still see her tooth going into the palm of my hand!”

Dr. Bruemmer suggested Jones see the ambulance crew stationed next to the closed bridge. But they had no antibiotics available.

“I was able to send a prescription electronically through eClinicalWorks to my local pharmacy, go down and pick it up, and I took it out to the airport in Monterey, where there’s a helicopter crew who was shuttling back and forth to people on the other side of the broken bridge,” Dr. Bruemmer said.

“They were able to bring her the antibiotics and she was able to start it that day.”

“When the office was closed and the patients were stuck, I felt fortunate that I was in town and able to access their records, and make all of these things happen for folks who otherwise had no way to get the care or the medications that they needed. Without eClinicalWorks through the cloud, I couldn’t have provided care to them at all.”

— Dr. Brita Bruemmer

“There was no trail, so I couldn’t have hiked out,” Jones said, “and you couldn’t get over the mudslide. Short of getting a helicopter ride out of Big Sur to go to the pharmacy to get the antibiotics, I probably would have ended up with an infection, possibly sepsis, limited use of my hand, even surgery. I was really grateful to the health center and their ability to help me. And my cat’s fine!”

The Bottom Line: Better Health Care

“When the office was closed, and the patients were stuck, I felt fortunate that I was in town and able to access their records and make all of these things happen for folks who otherwise had no way to get the care or the medications that they needed,” Dr. Bruemmer said. “Without eClinicalWorks through the cloud, I couldn’t have provided care to them.”

Carey notes that emergency medical evacuation services are always available to residents of Big Sur, but most residents prefer to avoid the expense involved and obtain care in the community.

“They’re like our family, and they trust us, and they know that whatever’s going on, we’ll do our very best to take care of them,” Carey said. “Every disaster is different, and we have many. So they call us and then we try to put the pieces together.” ■



Dr. Brita Bruemmer collecting prescriptions from the pharmacy. “I was able to send prescriptions electronically through eClinicalWorks to my local pharmacy, go down and pick them up, and take them out to the airport in Monterey, where there would be a helicopter crew who was shuttling back and forth to people on the other side of the broken bridge.”