

ATA Concludes 2011 Conference with ‘The Human Touch’

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TAMPA, FL – To the healthcare executives who attended the American Telemedicine Association’s 2011 conference last month, the sight of a 3-year-old adopted Chinese orphan playing on stage was enough to prove the value of their pursuits.

That Candace “Tutu” Hill was on stage at all was a tribute to telemedicine.

When Roger and Chris Hill sought to adopt her in 2010, they learned that she had a serious heart defect. With the help of an Australian nurse and the Swinfen Charitable Trust – an international trust established in 1998 to establish telemedicine links between specialists and people in developing nations in need of healthcare – the Hills were able to send Candace to the Shanghai Children’s Medical Center, where she received life-saving heart surgery.

That surgery was guided – some 6,000 miles away – by Karen S. Rheuban, MD, a pediatric cardiologist, professor of pediatrics and associate dean for continuing medical education at the University of Virginia, as well as a past president of the ATA.

“It’s not about the technology,” Rheuban told the ATA audience while Candace played nearby. “It’s about the people we serve.”

Tutu’s story was one of three presented on the final day of the three-day conference in Tampa, Fla. In a session titled “The Human Touch of Telemedicine,” she shared the stage with Jack Cheasty, who underwent surgery to repair a broken vertebra in his back – diagnosed through a teleneurology consult – following a motorcycle accident and punctuated his story with a good dozen push-ups; and Sandra Bowden, who helped launch a telestroke program at Christus St. Michael Medical center in Texarkana, Texas, and whose life was probably saved by the program when she suffered a stroke and was treated by Todd Samuels, MD, a Baltimore-based neurosurgeon working with the telemedicine provider Specialists on Call.

“He was in the room with me, on that camera,” a teary-eyed Bowden said of Samuels, who joined her on stage for a first-ever face-to-face meeting.

Those stories provided a fitting end to the three-day conference, which drew almost 4,000 people to the Tampa Convention Center. Topics that saw a considerable amount of interest during ATA 2011 included the rise of mobile health technology, using telemedicine to improve revenue cycle management and the international scope of the ATA.

Outgoing ATA President Dale Alverson, MD, medical director of the Center for Telehealth and Cybermedicine Research at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, even pitched telemedicine as a tool for global peace, pointing out that telemedicine “serves all the people of the world” regardless of political or religious differences.

The Exhibition Hall featured more than 220 vendors, including several first-time exhibitors. ATA officials said the 220,000-foot show floor was the largest and busiest the organization had seen to date.

The end of the conference saw Alverson hand over the reins of the ATA presidency to Bernard A. Harris Jr., MD, a former astronaut and president and CEO of the Houston-based venture capital firm Vesalius Ventures. Harris, the first African-American to walk in space, outlined his three goals in the coming year for the ATA:

- Improve access to health care in both urban and rural settings;
- Improve the “internationalization of the ATA;” and
- Define successful business practices and models for sustainability.

“ATA is on the front desk, in the in-box and in the e-mails” of the nation’s healthcare leaders,” he concluded. “Telemedicine ... has changed the patient’s expectations (and) is causing an evolution in medicine.”