



## Alumni Spotlight: Sandra Shewry

# SYNONYMOUS WITH PUBLIC SERVICE FOR CALIFORNIA

By Linda Anderberg

Thanks to Sandra Shewry, M.S.W., M.P.H. '81, someday soon the best thing on television might be your doctor. Shewry's convinced that telemedicine and telehealth can be key components in bringing affordable, quality health care to the underserved rural and urban communities in California.

In fact, she left the prestigious job of director of California's Department of Health Services last December to lead a newly formed initiative, the California Center for Connected Health (CCCH), established by the California HealthCare Foundation.

As a social welfare student at UC Berkeley, Shewry took a public health planning course with Professor Henrik Blum, who taught that effective change can take place through organizations and can then have huge societal impact for good. She really took this message to heart, first by applying to Berkeley's school of public health and then spending her career in public service. "I have been in public service for twenty-six years of my career," she says. "And for eleven of them I was director of a California state department."

"As the director of the Department of Health Services, you touch the lives of everyone in California," says Shewry, "through the clean water programs, the food safety programs, and very specifically through the health care services that we organized or financed."

So why leave that role? Shewry has seen the recent advances in technology and believes they can be transformational in terms of how health care is delivered, the expected outcomes, and the quality of care.

"I'm concerned that, if we're not mindful, the poor and underserved in California will get left behind in terms of the roll out of technology and telehealth advances," says Shewry. "And this is an opportunity to work with a small group of dedicated, passionate, smart people, and try to see what we can do to be sure that doesn't happen."

As director of CCCH, Shewry's mission is to make California a national model for telehealth integration into the health care system. Telehealth is the broad concept of using technology to connect patients and providers with health care services and one another—delivering services and education when and where they are needed most. This can include medical education, patient outreach, and home monitoring. It could even be an academic medical center linked via live video feed to a surgery that's going on in a remote location, so that an academic specialist can be a consult to the onsite provider.

"One of the paradoxes in health care delivery is that if we look at the gross statistics, in most specialty areas we probably have enough specialists, but we have a chronic and persistent maldistribution of them," explains Shewry.

"In many parts of rural California or in densely populated inner cities, we haven't found a

way to make specialty care easily accessible," says Shewry. Approximately five million people live in rural areas that make up 80 percent of California's territory; there are shortages of health care providers in 51 of 58 counties. "Telehealth offers us the opportunity to create linkages between people in those areas and the specialists they need," she says.

For now, telehealth is mainly about linking a provider site to another provider site. Shewry believes we're on the edge of the future, and that the future will bring health care into the home. This could include blood sugar monitoring, recording weight changes, and measuring lung capacity all from the home. Shewry believes this will help the "aging in place movement" and that it will "enable us to stay independent for much longer as we age."

Shewry's goals are to think through the policies, regulations, and laws surrounding technology and health, and to identify what needs to change in order to bring telehealth to its full potential, especially for low-income patients. And she plans to get started right away.

"At this phase of the start up, I'm becoming more familiar with the exciting things that are going on in the state in this field," she says. "A typical day for me is learning." 🌱