Kabul-born Dr Waheed Arian, a clinical radiology specialty registrar at Liverpool's Aintree University Hospital, has been praised for developing a lifesaving telemedicine scheme through his charitable trust ARIAN TELE-HEAL.

Volunteer medics in the UK use web-based video-conferencing and smartphones to advise and train their colleagues in Afghanistan. Here, Dr Arian tells of his experiences, and how he wants the scheme to help thousands of other people in conflict-torn countries across the globe.

When I first arrived in the UK as a teenage refugee from Afghanistan speaking just a few words of English, I could not have predicted that 15 years later I would be leading a project saving dozens of lives in my country of birth.

The TELE-HEAL scheme is very simple, which is its strength. Volunteer medical staff in the UK give a few minutes of their time each week. They use their own smartphones or Skype to provide clinical advice based on UK guidelines to doctors in civilian hospitals in Kabul.

The scheme has been very successful. We started small, but now have 50 volunteer medics. We have expanded from five pilot hospitals to all 14 major hospitals in Kabul. Afghanistan health service leaders credit TELE-HEAL with saving dozens of lives each month, a tremendous outcome.

The resources and knowledge to manage trauma and emergency patients in Afghanistan are lacking compared to the UK. TELE-HEAL provides essential advice to clinicians while building their skills for the future.

The success of TELE-HEAL has seen a very long-term vision of mine come to fruition. As a young child, my family and I were caught in the Soviet-Afghan conflict. The fighting meant that I only had four years of formal schooling. Much of my education came from reading science or medicine schoolbooks as I sheltered under tables in cellars, with bombs and rockets exploding nearby.

Growing up in that environment, I developed a desire to become a doctor to help the people who I saw suffering around me each day.

After a hazardous journey over the mountains, my family eventually escaped to a Pakistan refugee camp. I spent three years there, surviving tuberculosis, several bouts of malaria and famine.

When I was age 15, my family helped me migrate to the UK on my own, giving me the best chance for my future. I only spoke only a few words of English, which I had learned by tuning my father’s radio to the BBC World Service after he had finished listening to Farsi stations.

I worked in shops when I arrived, and studied as hard as possible. I had to support my family of ten in Kabul while also raising my young brother, who joined me in 2001. I gained five A grades at A-Level before graduating from Cambridge University, Imperial School of Medicine and Harvard Medical School. Many people struggle to believe that I could have done this, given my childhood and the obstacles in my way. But I have always been focused on my goal to help as many people as I could.

A decade on, as a doctor, I have returned to Afghanistan numerous times to lead education and training sessions, most recently with the 2015 European Union Police Mission.

Aintree’s population has among the greatest health challenges in the UK, and is also the Cheshire and Merseyside Major Trauma Centre Collaborative receiving site. My experiences here helped develop TELE-HEAL, and I also established the first Advanced Trauma and Emergency Care Course for Afghan specialists.

The Royal College of Radiologists, Head of the School of Radiology, Training Programme Director, tutors, consultants and my registrar colleagues have supported me, and I hope that our success in Afghanistan will be a stepping stone to help other war-torn countries. We are in discussions on rolling out to Africa and, closer to home, we plan to use the principle to improve communications between Aintree’s Emergency Department and local GPs.

Clinicians of any role, grade or background can volunteer for ARIAN TELE-HEAL by visiting www.ariantele-heal.com

WAHEED ARIAN
Clinical radiology specialty registrar, Aintree University Hospital

Declaration of Interest – Waheed Arian is Founder and Director of Arian Tele-HEAL Charitable Trust.