It was a perfect storm, and it was beginning to hit closer to home. In 2010, Roby Miller's family business – a chain of 6 rural pharmacies in small communities in Iowa, USA - was reeling from the expenses of retaining pharmacists at its pharmacy locations. The perfect storm came from an aging workforce (rural pharmacists in Iowa were, on average, over 60 years old), population shift away from rural communities towards cities, stalled economic growth, the complexity of American healthcare insurance, and especially some policy changes affecting reimbursements for dispensed prescriptions. "It's hard to keep a store open when you lose $30,000 a year," Roby reminisces now. "For a rural area, closing one of the stores was a really big deal for the community."

Working those days at Pearson, an education solutions provider, Roby Miller had a BA in Entrepreneurship from the University of Iowa. He was researching possible solutions for his family business and, over the course of a weekend, he put together a plan to let pharmacies share a pharmacist using telepresence. There were a few telepresence solutions on the market then, but they were too expensive for an average rural or small-time pharmacy to afford. Also, they were either cumbersome to deploy and use, or lacked the seamless integration that Roby envisioned.

Existing laws in most states in the USA require that licensed pharmacists be present in pharmacies to oversee the work of the pharmacy technicians, verify prescriptions, dosage, and correct dispensation, to counsel patients, etc. Roby's challenge was to create a software environment that allowed pharmacists to remotely manage a team of pharmacy technicians, the inventory of drugs and supplies, to check that prescriptions were filled correctly, to offer patients counselling about their medicines at the pharmacy counter over an internet-connected computer screen (like a videoconference) AND to do all this in full compliance with HIPAA patient privacy laws, FDA and state guidelines. The clock was ticking. Between 2010 and 2012, over 40 small pharmacies had been shuttered across Iowa. Any of his family's pharmacies could be next.

In 2012, Roby created TelePharm, LLC. He took his business plan to business pitch competitions at the University of Iowa and in the state, and found a receptive audience. Roby had started out with "zero coding experience" and taught himself, before expanding his team. Initially, Roby's family was pitching in with the bootstrapping. A major break was winning a state grant, the Iowa Demonstration Fund in 2012. In October 2012, Roby Miller's dream came true when Iowa's first telepharmacy was inaugurated. Investors began to take notice of his company, TelePharm. "In the seed rounds the investors were a little more hands on, they had a greater personal interest in the product. In series A discussions however, it was much more intense and official. They are very serious meetings," Roby remembers. In the space of the next two years, Roby's company went on to raise over $2.5 Million in seed funding, and support from some of the most respected names in the Iowa investors circuit. TelePharm was also featured on the Rock Health startup incubator portfolio.

As Roby's team was expanding, their product had reached a long way from his weekend project's prototype. They created a scalable solution that could let any establishment open a small-volume pharmacy where none existed before, or enable a struggling pharmacy to realize unprecedented cost savings by teaming up with larger partner pharmacies elsewhere. While Roby did go through the usual trade conferences and networking event circuit, his unique and low-cost proposition had pharmacy owners knocking at the door. By mid-2015, Telepharm was already powering over 55 pharmacies across 9 states in the USA. That same year, Roby's company made its first acquisition, solidifying its position as a provider of telepharmacy solutions.

"It seems like there are so many different things that we can do from this platform," Miller noted early on. Other noticed, too. In 2016, TelePharm was acquired by Cardinal Health. Roby continues to lead the team at TelePharm. He also supports entrepreneurship in his community by serving on the board of the John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center at the University of Iowa, and as co-founder of Built By Iowa, an early to mid-stage business fund in Iowa City.

Almost half of healthcare IT startups fail within their first two years (Accenture, data from 900 companies). Roby had never run a business before he started TelePharm as its sole founder. He ventured into a healthcare niche that was almost uncharted territory, and fraught with complex rules and regulations. Yet, he persevered, creating an "economic game-changer for the pharmacy industry," and even inspired legislation that paved the way for easier expansion of telepharmacy services in Iowa. Not just to the author, but to the hundreds of thousands of people who are already being served by the solutions he created, he is very deserving of the title of an Innovation Superhero.

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Written by Dr. Mitul Sarkar. The author has no business affiliation or financial interest with Roby Miller, TelePharm or Cardinal Health. The author and Miller were alumni at the University of Iowa, where their paths crossed during community events celebrating startups and innovation.