r. Gilbert Mudge, president and CEO of Partners HealthCare International, sat in a brightly lit room last October at the Université Felix Houphouet-Boigny in Africa’s Ivory Coast and put pen to paper, signing an agreement with the university to develop a new academic medical center.

The partnership was one of several similar deals that Partners committed to last year, from the redesign of health systems in Malta to the construction of hospitals and clinical programs in China.

Collectively, the deals offer insight into an emerging, and many say profitable, frontier for exporting U.S. health care overseas. In Massachusetts, Lahey Health and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center have confirmed that they too are exploring opportunities with foreign partners. Nationally, a slew of prominent providers are following suit, including Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Maryland; New York-Presbyterian Hospital; and University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Pennsylvania, among others.

“Every academic medical center is under significant financial constraint. The ability to build out one’s capability by expanding one’s horizons on a global basis makes perfect sense,” Mudge said.

**PROJECTS ABROAD**

Partners has been looking abroad for partnerships for nearly two decades, although the reasons driving that expansion have evolved.

The provider’s initial efforts were intended to bring more referrals back to Boston.

**Health care WITHOUT BORDERS**

**THE EXPERTISE THAT LIVES WITHIN BOSTON’S WORLD-RENOWED HOSPITALS IS BEING EXPORTED TO WHERE DEMAND IS STRONGEST: OVERSEAS.**

**BY JESSICA BARTLETT | jbartlett@bizjournals.com**
However, the program’s first, major strategic shift occurred in 2008 when Harvard Medical School International was integrated into Partners, bringing in expertise to consult on projects overseas. Partners Harvard Medical International operated until 2012, when the group ended its affiliation with Harvard and became Partners HealthCare International. PHI has since expanded, both geographically and in total offerings.

The financial incentives to double-down on international expansions are compelling for local care providers. Mudge said revenue from Partners HealthCare International ranges from $10 million to $20 million in a given year. Partners’ total revenue in 2015 was $7.3 billion. Projects typically offer a 10-to-25 percent profit margin.

In Malta, the opening of a medical school, a new teaching hospital and the renovation of a third hospital has the potential to generate at least $600,000 in revenue for Partners. Work in the country may also open opportunities into other European countries.

Work in the Ivory Coast will be more modest, Mudge has said. Partners will help build a $200 million hospital, funding for which will come from a mix of government accounts and private fundraising. Though less profitable, the work will enable Partners to set new standards for the operation of academic medical hospitals in the region.

“It creates a perfect opportunity,” said Steven Thompson, senior vice president and chief business development officer for Brigham and Women’s Hospital. “Something that’s valued, something we have as an asset, how do we monetize that, and in furtherance of the mission?”

Partners projects also are based in India, Qatar, and Shanghai, China. It also is likely to begin projects in two more Chinese cities — Chongqing and Nanjing — to design new hospitals and refine business plans.

Mudge said Partners’ presence in foreign countries can vary in scale, depending on the scope of services. For example, Partners used a total of 183 people to build a hospital in Jiahui International Hospital in Shanghai.

Supporting international efforts is a staff of 30 people at 100 Cambridge St. in Boston, along with independent representatives in Beijing, Dubai and Bermuda.

Most projects take years to materialize. Brigham and Women’s Hospital, a subset of Partners, in partnership with Dana-Farber Cancer Institute is collaborating with Bermuda Cancer and Health Centre to design and develop a radiotherapy program on the island. Discussions to bring such a program to Bermuda have been ongoing for three to four years, and have stemmed from a longer-term relationship Partners has had bringing physicians to the island. Radiation programs will be built from scratch on the island, with three to four people at Partners in some sort of oversight role. The project is expected to generate less than $1 million in revenue for Partners.

Island officials say work with Partners makes sense. “We’re not interested in just hiring a single consultant to oversee a function. It’s us being able to tap into that broad range of expertise,” said Tara E. Soares, director for the Bermuda Cancer and Health Centre.

Lahey Health officials said the care provider has been engaged with various international projects for 25 years, but in September created a new position — CEO of its Executive & International Health program — and appointed Linda Moulton to the role.

Moulton said her goal is to look at international partnerships more strategically, and approach international growth as a business more than an ancillary medical service. Today, Lahey has partnerships with groups in Bermuda, Canada and Jordan, where it has been advising a Women’s Health Center that opened in December.

Moulton said Lahey isn’t paid as a consultant through the Jordan program, but is paid for referrals and second-opinion consultations. Other Lahey projects in the early stages of development include partners in the Caribbean and Latin America. “Everyone is looking at how to diversify revenue streams. Our driver is the extension of the Lahey brand ... to raise the visibility and reputation of Lahey,” Moulton said.

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center also is making a foray abroad with a new agreement involving its Harvard Medical Faculty Physicians unit and the World Health Organization. The deal initially will involve building software to connect expectant mothers with health providers in remote areas of Chile and Argentina.

“Some of these emerging nations, like Brazil, Chile and Colombia, their governments are spending millions modernizing their health care infrastructure,” said Dr. Yuri Quintana, director of Global Health Informatics at BIDMC, who is spearheading the WHO initiative. “There are funds available at these countries. There is an opportunity for advising these countries, beyond the grants.”

WHERE OPPORTUNITY LIES

According to Thompson, as more countries gain wealth, and as the Internet opens understanding of modern medicine, more countries are seeking total overhauls of their health systems.

“Despite the black eye U.S. health care gets from a financing standpoint, ironically, the way health care is delivered is the envy of people all over the world,” said Thompson, who worked at Johns Hopkins developing international partnerships before joining the Brigham last year. He said the biggest opportunities are in the Middle East, Asia and South America.

Mudge said Partners anticipates opportunities to replicate its ongoing project in Malta — where Partners is redesigning the country’s health care through hospital renovation and development — in other European countries. While certain regions want help developing more general health care, there is also a broadening need to bring geriatric services and rehabilitation services abroad, Mudge said.

Added BIDMC’s Quintana: “I think this will be an opportunity not only for BIDMC, but as these markets grow, it’s one of the major areas of growth for the private sector as well.”