

Telemedicine Nurses: Expanding Patients' Access to Care

February 24, 2012 – 10,000 new telemedicine visits. That is the projected benefit of a new initiative launched this past fall by the North West LHIN. The initiative saw the hiring of 28 new nurses to help deliver cutting-edge 21st century health care to people across this region. When you consider that in 2010, there were just over 20,000 telemedicine visits in Northwestern Ontario, the hiring of these new nurses will result in a nearly 50 percent increase in telemedicine activity. And that is good news for patients and their families in this region.

Telemedicine is best described as the delivery of health care services using information and communications technology. Picture a patient in front of a two-way video monitor. At the other end, a specialist who is hundreds if not thousands of miles away. The two can speak, patient information such as blood pressure, respiratory function or test results can be instantaneously transmitted, and a consultation that might otherwise not have been possible can take place. Now picture a region as vast as Northwestern Ontario. Imagine the challenges faced by a family in a remote First Nation community whose child needs a specialist consultation in Thunder Bay, or possibly even Toronto. The potential of telemedicine to improve health care and save lives becomes very clear.

Telemedicine was first introduced to Northern Ontario in 1998. It is delivered in this province by the Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN), which is one of the largest such networks in the world. KO Telemedicine also operates in the Northwest, servicing many remote First Nations communities. The two networks collaborate to provide seamless care in the region.

The impacts of this technology on this region, in terms of minimizing the effects of distance and isolation, have been profound. In 2010/11, the use of telemedicine in the North West LHIN resulted in more than \$11 million in avoided travel costs, and more than 27 million kilometres in avoided travel. More important, it resulted in patients receiving the kind of specialized care and support they might otherwise have had to do without.

The new telemedicine nurse initiative is almost completely up and running. Almost all of the 28 nurses have been hired and have either received or are in the process of finishing required training. For the most part, these nurses provide support to patients at the "host" site. They operate the equipment, help patients in the diagnostic and assessment phase, and facilitate communication with the specialist at the other site. In a few cases, some of these nurses are also specialists themselves. A nurse who is a wound care specialist, for example, might consult remotely from Thunder Bay with a patient in Manitouwadge or Fort Hope.

Telemedicine is considered by many to be the wave of the future in health care. It tears down geographic barriers to ensure that patients have access to the right provider, in the right place, at the right time. Given the potential for telemedicine in an area as vast as ours, the North West LHIN is ensuring that this region is a leader in this delivery model of care.