

Telehealth linking doctors

By Theresa Seraphim
Herald Reporter

Medicine in the Parkland took a giant step into the future March 22 with the launch of the Dauphin site of the Manitoba Telehealth (MBTelehealth) network.

The system, which works on Internet protocol and can be located in any hospital with a local area network, allows doctors at a site to get in touch with specialists via a computer-like machine, with participants at both ends of the network being able to see, hear and talk to each other.

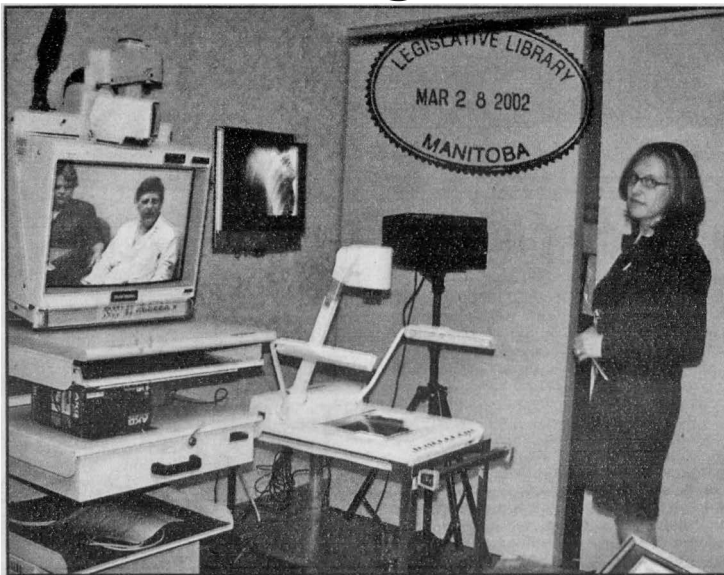
A high-resolution digital camera takes pictures of the part of the body the surgeon is to look at, and X-rays can also be transmitted to the specialist.

"Doctors and patients in the Parkland area can be in faster access" to specialists in Winnipeg and Brandon, said Merv Toderian, chairman of the Parkland Regional Health Authority.

Currently, 23 sites - each regional health authority has at least one site - are hooked up to the network, including Swan River, Ashern and Brandon. The First Nations community of Berens River is also part of the system, while the community at Norway House will come on board later this year.

A six-member Telehealth team ensures the smooth operation of the system.

The Dauphin General Hospital Foundation donated \$30,000 towards this city's Telehealth site, while the federal government kicked in \$3



Jackie Jones, Dauphin Telehealth site co-ordinator, demonstrates how the program's technology works. On the big screen is Dr. Ray Postuma, who is being sent a patient's X-ray via the small screen.

million and the province gave \$1.5 million.

"Telehealth in Manitoba makes a lot of sense if we can reduce travel (time) for patients and their families," said Wayne Boyce, director of Telehealth for the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority.

The network provides opportunities to bring people together and eliminate a sense of isolation, said Boyce.

"Over time, we hope and

believe that doctors will be able to participate with their colleagues in grand rounds," he noted, adding this means physicians in remoter areas can watch doctors at, for example, Health Sciences Centre look at patients and even go with the caregivers to their bedsides.

Technology should be installed in future which would allow all sites at once to be linked up, said Boyce. One of

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the main benefits of this would be availability for consultation and guidance.

"We can provide real-time mentoring and support for doctors in (three or four years)," Boyce stated.

Another innovation would be a virtual waiting room, where patients in, for example, Dauphin or Thompson would not have to wait to "see" the doctor.

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PRHA CEO Andre Remillard (left) presents Dr. Jim Compton (middle), chair of the Dauphin General Hospital Foundation, and Russ Secord, the foundation's vice-chair, with a plaque commemorating the group's \$30,000 Telehealth donation.

Expansion already planned

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"We would go immediately to these sites to see those patients," said Boyce, adding the procedure would be even quicker than real waiting rooms.

Dauphin-Roblin MLA Stan Struthers called the occasion "a great day for health care" in the Parkland.

"This is a good step forward and something that deserves our support."

Parkland Regional Health Authority CEO Andre Remillard agreed the launch marks a new era.

"We've heard a lot about e-business and e-commerce and things like that. Well, I think today brings to us e-medicine."

The network is already expanding, with next week's hookup to a spe-

cialist in fetal alcohol syndrome/fetal alcohol effect, said Remillard.

He noted not only will Telehealth save travel time, but virtual meetings will help cut down on administrative costs as well.

Dr. Ray Postuma, a pediatric surgeon at Health Sciences Centre, also praised the project.

"By being able to see the (patient's) body, it's very, very helpful," allowing one doctor and patient to consult together with another specialist if need be.

"We need to be able to help each other over distance," Postuma stressed, adding the project will have an "immense" impact on patients.

"We're basically now seeing each other at the speed of light."

The Telehealth system means rather than the patient making three trips - one for speaking with the anesthesiologist, one for the surgery itself, and one for the followup - only one journey, for the actual surgery, would be required, said Postuma.

He noted another benefit of the project which affects patients in communities with high physician turnovers, citing testimonial and anecdotal evidence which says doctors in communities with Telehealth stay longer in those places, and the average age of practitioners is going down.

"It's a real incentive," stressed Postuma.

"This technology does help improve retention of caregivers, especially in smaller communities."