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S.J. General to link patients, doctors via video

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By **Joe Goldeen**
Record Staff Writer
June 06, 2008 6:00 AM

FRENCH CAMP - San Joaquin County's drastic shortage of physician specialists could improve rapidly with the announcement that San Joaquin General Hospital has been selected as one of six initial telehealth programs using video technology to link out-of-area doctors with local patients.

The half-dozen sites spread throughout the San Joaquin Valley are at the forefront of what is expected to become a larger project using telemedicine technologies to connect physicians with patients in some of the region's most rural and underserved communities.

San Joaquin County has one of the worst ratios of doctors to patients in the state at just one licensed physician for every 686 residents. The statewide average is one physician for every 379 residents.

"In terms of need, there is clearly a need here for more doctors and more hospital beds," San Joaquin County's Health Care Services Director Ken Cohen said earlier this year.

Using high-resolution video equipment provided by the Valley Telehealth Partnership based at the University of California, Merced, sites will be able to access specialists for real-time video consultations with patients. Medical specialties at first will include dermatology, psychiatry, pediatric specialties, endocrinology and gastroenterology, with more to come.

Installation of equipment and training is expected to take place this summer at all six sites. In addition to San Joaquin General in French Camp, the initial telehealth partners include Castle Family Health Centers in Atwater, Mercy Hospital Family Care Clinic in Merced, National Health Services in Oildale, Sierra Kings District Hospital in Reedley and United Health Center in Kerman.

UC Merced received nearly \$1 million in 2007 - \$500,000 from AT&T, \$200,000 from the California Emerging Technology Fund and \$250,000 from the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley - to establish the Valley Telehealth Partnership.

"This project will improve access to specialty care in the near term and provides a foundation for the UC Merced School of Medicine in the long term by extending opportunities for medical education throughout the Valley," said Maria Pallavicini, UC Merced's dean of natural sciences, who oversees the partnership and leads planning for the three-year-old university's proposed medical school.

More than 170 health care facilities and clinics from Stockton to Bakersfield and the Sierra foothills were surveyed and considered as initial sites for the telehealth program, but the partnership's funding allowed only the six sites along with a hub at UC Merced.

Jennifer Smith, UC Merced's telemedicine project manager, said one of the benefits will be the ability to bring together patients, their primary-care physicians and specialists.

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"What's so rare is that you get that team together. It's so exciting," Smith said.

Pallavicini noted that the same equipment used for telemedicine can be used for learning purposes to educate physicians and patients alike.

Contact reporter Joe Goldeen at (209) 546-8278 or jgoldeen@recordnet.com.

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