

# News

## TELEMEDICINE LETS PATIENTS TUNE IN TO SPECIALIZED CARE

### SAN JOAQUIN GENERAL ALSO A "HUB" FOR DOCTORS

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FRENCH CAMP - San Joaquin General Hospital has added highly trained physician specialists in nephrology (kidney disease) and neurology (nervous system) to its list of services without spending the time and expense to recruit and hire anyone.

No longer do county doctors have to refer patients to Sacramento, San Francisco or Palo Alto for these specialized services in short supply in San Joaquin County. After getting their referral appointments, all the patients have to do is get to the hospital in French Camp and make their way to the tele-health center carved out of space left vacant when San Joaquin General opened a new, off-site dialysis facility.

The patient will sit in front of a high-resolution, large-screen Polycom television monitor equipped with a closed-circuit camera and microphone that allows the specialist physician to conduct a two-way interview and visual examination from a remote location.

The kidney specialists could be in Colusa or Santa Rosa, for instance, while the neurologists could be in Newport Beach or Cedars-Sinai Medical Center's Center for International Health and Telemedicine in Los Angeles.

One year ago, San Joaquin General was selected from among 170 facilities by the University of California, Merced, to be an initial site in the university's Valley Telehealth Partnership, funded by a grant of nearly \$1 million from AT&T, the California Emerging Technology Fund and the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley.

Last week, telemedicine services were finally launched after a year of planning, training and installation of video equipment and network connections. The other five initial partner sites are:

- » Castle Family Health Centers, Atwater.
- » John C. Fremont Hospital Northside Clinic, Greeley Hill.
- » National Health Services, Oildale.
- » Sierra Kings District Hospital, Reedley.
- » United Health Center, Kerman.

In addition to being referred to as a "spoke" - a distant location where patients receive services - San Joaquin General is also a "hub," a site from which specialist physicians deliver service to distant patients. The county-run public hospital is a partnership hub for cardiology, dermatology, high-risk obstetrics and neonatology, according to Dr. Jerry Royer, chief medical officer at San Joaquin General.

Royer noted that telemedicine is not a new concept for San Joaquin County health professionals. The county already is using similar technology or considering getting involved with the Health Care Interpreter Network; teleneurology for the hospital emergency room; mental health services for juvenile justice programs; connecting child-abuse sexual assault professionals for workshops, conferences and educational purposes; and linking up with UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento to conduct child sexual assault evidentiary examinations.

The latter, while conducted by San Joaquin General at a budgeted cost of \$177,000 annually, could prove to be a cost-saving action for the county if done remotely through videoconferencing. It could be better for the victim, too, according to Royer, who said, "These exams are now being done in the hospital's emergency room, and that is not a proper place."

The Valley Telehealth Partnership expects to expand its reach beyond the six initial sites to provide a telemedicine network from Lodi to Bakersfield and up into the foothills and Sierra Nevada.

"This is just the beginning of what is expected to become a larger regional project that will use telemedicine technologies to connect patients with physicians in some of the Valley's most rural and underserved communities," said Maria Pallavicini, UC Merced's dean of natural sciences, who initiated the partnership.

Additional specialties are expected to include endocrinology, gastroenterology, infectious diseases, psychiatry and pediatric specialties.

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