



California Telehealth Network will let UC specialists give consultations to doctors in remote areas

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In less than 60 days, doctors in remote areas in California will be able to forward X-rays and scans through secure networks to specialists at various UC medical centers for consultation.

The specialists will then be able to send back their diagnoses via these networks without actually traveling to visit the patients.

The idea behind the California Telehealth Network is to give the public access to medical care through the telephone, the Internet and videoconferences.

"It is designed to serve patients more effectively," said Dr. Andrea Gerstenberger, director of the health sciences planning and services development program at the University of California Office of the President.

The program recently selected AT&T as the telecommunications carrier for this project. The actual development will take another couple of years, and AT&T hopes to begin opening lines within 60 days and plans to link 200 to 300 sites each year.

The initial concept developed by the Universal Services Fund, a non-profit organization that works to bring medical care to low-income regions, was to help subsidize the cost of phone services for rural and underserved urban areas by allowing them to branch off existing networks.

Though the technology to remotely diagnose patients has existed for several years, the telehealth network will work to bring this capability specifically to underprivileged regions by using existing telecommunication lines. In addition, the program will be highly subsidized.

The UC has been selected on behalf of the state of California to take the telehealth project a step further by using these telecommunication lines to bring health care and medical consultation to 863 non-profit medical and mental health centers throughout the state.

"(The UCs) will be able to have a secure broadband network to any of these 863 sites to provide video-based education for doctors, nurses and health-care workers," said Dr. Thomas Nesbitt of the UC Davis Health System. "They can also do consultations."

The \$22.1 million grant awarded to the UC system by the Federal Communications Commission is the largest sum granted to a single state in the nation-wide telehealth program.

The California Emerging Technology Fund will give a 15 percent match to this grant with another \$3.6 million.

Though the telehealth program will result in lines being added to an already extensive telecommunication network, Nesbitt said it will not tighten the UC medical system's budget.

Rather, it will help to relieve their budget, as part of the telecommunications cost will now be subsidized through the telehealth program.

However, this program will not increase the workload of the UC medical staff, Nesbitt said.

"We can utilize one lecture without the doctor driving to another place to give that same lecture again two days later," Nesbitt said. "The old-system lecture was only available to the people in the room. The new-system lecture is available to more."