

RRHC joins statewide telehealth network

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Redwoods Rural Health Center has become one of the first 50 health care providers to join the California Telehealth Network (CTN).

This new program, which was launched statewide on Tuesday, August 24, by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and a host of health care and technology leaders, is intended to link underserved urban and rural areas with medical providers throughout the state.

Using broadband to connect healthcare providers, CTN will allow patients at small rural clinics like RRHC to be "seen" on two-way video in real time by specialists in other locations rather than forcing the patient to travel long distances for specialty medical care.

Ultimately CTN will connect more than 800 California clinics and hospitals, according to a press release from the network.

Mark Mowrey, R.N., the clinical nurse manager at RRHC, explained how it will work.

When an RRHC patient has a condition that cannot be adequately diagnosed or treated locally, his or

her provider will refer the patient to a CTN specialist. An appointment with the specialist will be made and the necessary paperwork faxed to the specialist's location.

The patient will come to RRHC for the scheduled appointment and will talk to the specialist through two-way video.

Currently, specialists from the University of California at San Francisco, Davis, and Irvine are available for consultation through CTN.

Mowrey said the network will be used primarily for those specialties where there are few or no practitioners available in Humboldt County, particularly neurology and psychiatry.

"There are lots of local psychiatric issues," Mowrey noted. Patients will be able to talk to a psychiatrist in complete privacy on a secure internet connection with no one else present, exactly as if the patient were actually in the doctor's office.

Another service, called "Store and Forward," is particularly useful for puzzling skin conditions. For example, if a patient has a rash that RRHC staff cannot identify, a picture of the rash and the provider's notes can be sent to a CTN dermatologist for evaluation.

Response time can be as little as six hours, Mowrey said.

The service is provided at no additional cost to either the patient or RRHC, as it will be paid for entirely from CTN's \$30 million grant. Patients and/or their insurers will be billed only for the services and tests provided by RRHC.

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CTN's funding includes \$22 million from the Federal Communications Commission, \$3.6 million from the California Emerging Technology Fund, and the balance from a variety of public and private entities including the University of California.

RRHC has had previous experience with telemedicine. The health center had a grant that enabled them to connect with a UC psychiatrist for weekly "telepsych" sessions through the Open Door Clinic in Eureka's telehealth service.

The connection to Open Door also provided other services, including diabetic education, which Mowrey said accounted for about 60% of the use of the connection. Unfortunately the modem died a year ago. Seeing CTN on the horizon, RRHC decided to wait for the broader service to be available.

"Patients may be anxious about talking to a screen at first," Mowrey observed, "but they soon see that the only thing missing is touch. They realize that they can talk with the doctor and soon get past the anxiety."

He emphasized that telemedicine is a supplement to the care provided by the health center and is not intended to replace patients' relationships with their local primary care providers.

Now that the network has been officially launched, CTN will soon be sending technicians to the health center to assess the facility to determine how to wire and set up the connection.

After the wiring is completed, there will probably be some orientation to familiarize the staff with specific procedures.

Mowrey is hopeful the program will be up and

running, ready to serve RRHC patients within the next month.

"We're excited about giving our patients a broader experience of care and reducing transportation issues. This is a great opportunity that we hope people will take advantage of," he said.

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