

Telemedicine network hooks up small-town, rural clinics

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A new telemedicine network is making specialized health care more convenient for some rural South Dakotans who would otherwise have to drive long distances.

Patti Slater, owner of Wards Store and Bakery in De Smet, used the Health Care Horizon telemedicine network for a consultation with a Sioux Falls dermatologist via videoconference.

"For me running a business, it is nice to do it this way," she said. "It saves me a lot of time. In the past, I would have had to go to Huron to have this taken care of. This time, I was looking at Sioux Falls or Watertown."

Earlier this year, the Dakota Network, a collection of community health center organizations in South Dakota, created the network.

Originally, 10 clinics associated with Horizon Health Care in Howard were involved. Now, six other community health center organizations, with 14 clinics, have joined the network and will be involved with videoconferencing and telemedicine.

They include Rural Health Care, Prairie Community Health, Community Health Care Association, Family Health Care Center, Sioux River Valley Community Health Center and Union County Health Foundation.

The telemedicine network allows health care providers to communicate with one another and connects clinics to larger health care facilities for consultation.

The equipment allows personnel to talk to one another, share documents, check X-rays and view live video or still shots of patients.

The network is funded through a combination of U.S. Department of Agriculture grants and special appropriations.

De Smet Bell Medical Clinic, one of Horizon Health Care's 10 medical clinics in South Dakota, has telemedicine capabilities.

Soon, work will start on connecting Howard to the telemedicine network, followed by Wessington Springs, Mission and Martin. The remaining facilities will be hooked into the network in 2006, said Scott Weatherill,

information technology supervisor for Horizon Health Care.

"The benefit for patients is to bring the health care service to the community and keep the patient in the community," Weatherill said.

Telemedicine also improves continuity of patient care among clinic providers and specialty physicians, and it increases access to specialty health care within the community, Weatherill said.

Without the network, Allan Ogren of De Smet would have had to travel to Sioux Falls or Huron to meet with a dermatologist. Instead, he was able to have a consultation at De Smet's Bell Medical Clinic.

"I can find time to do it, but it takes time, and I have other things I need to do," he said.

Ogren said patients who put off seeing a doctor now might get checked because of the convenience of the system.

Slater appreciates that convenience.

"Doctors are knowledgeable here and could do the procedures right here if need be," she said.

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