

The Dickinson Connection: Telemedicine

Finding specialty doctors can be challenging in rural communities. While Dickinson and the surrounding areas enjoy the benefits of having several specialty clinics available, there are still some types of specialty care that are difficult to access like, for example, mental health services. Telemedicine is a promising opportunity to help smaller communities connect with those healthcare experts and the support teams in larger cities.

Dickinson offers appointments with psychologists and licensed substance abuse counselors, care that is immensely beneficial to many citizens. A psychiatrist does travel to Dickinson periodically, but availability can be tricky. Sometimes when unavailable, people will still need more specialized care than they are able to get from a family medicine doctor or the psychologist and would benefit from the psychiatrist's expertise. This is where telemedicine can impact care. Similar to how grandparents may Facetime grandchildren, psychiatrists can be brought to the patient by telemedicine, saving patients from the time and expense of a hundred mile drive to Bismarck. This teleconnection is especially helpful for hospitalized patients that need special care before being discharged back home.

Though telemedicine is more technical than Facetime and requires special secure, privacy-protected videoconferencing networks, it helps patients and providers. A psychiatrist in Bismarck or Fargo can use voice and video technology to talk with patients. The psychiatrist can even teleconnect with the patient's regular primary care doctor to make sure that important treatment plans are understood by everyone. Teleconnection also helps patient feel that their care is more private since they're unlikely to run into their Bismarck or Fargo doctor in the Dickinson grocery store.

Telemedicine also helps to support the local Dickinson providers. For example, when someone is hospitalized they are usually under the care of a hospital-based doctor who may want the psychiatrist's opinion. Telemedicine provides a quick way for the psychiatrist to assess the patients and provide additional expertise to the patient and the hospital care team.

Of course there are concerns about telemedicine. For example, having a secure privacy protected network is needed. Another is that the communities have to have the specialized internet capabilities to support videoconferencing. There are also concerns about payment for the telemedicine and licensing issues if telemedicine providers practice in one state but use telemedicine in another state. In spite of these hurdles, telemedicine is a great way for technology to make health care access easier and more efficient.

This column, written by Alysa Lerud, a third year medical student at the University of North Dakota's School of Medicine and Health Sciences, is written for information purposes only. It should not be used for diagnosis or treatment. Do not delay seeking advice or disregard medical advice by what you have read in this column.