

Doctors, patients stay better connected via telemedicine

BY RUTH ANN GRANT

Telemedicine is still rare in nursing homes, but some are finding it can yield huge benefits.

"With telemedicine technology, we can give our residents instantaneous access to a physician," explains Elaine Tetreault, director of nursing at New Bedford (MA) Health Care Center.

Through video conferencing technology established by PhoneDOCTORx, of Fairhaven, MA, the nursing home's residents have access to on-call emergency medicine doctors at St. Luke's Hospital in New Bedford. The set-up has helped the facility cut down on residents' trips to the emergency room and subsequent hospital admissions, Tetreault said.

By minimizing hospital admissions, the nursing home also has significantly decreased its number of bed-hold days and loss of revenue when a Medicare beneficiary is hospitalized, she said. Plus, the time staff previously spent on referral documentation to transport residents to the hospital is freed for direct resident care.

"Plain and simple, this has enhanced our quality of care," Tetreault said.

Another benefit to the telemedicine program is nurses



New Bedford Health Care Center has been consulting doctors off-site.

don't waste time recalling physicians' answering services or waiting for a return call, which may come when their shift is over, Tetreault said. When a need arises, staff members wheel a computer equipped with a camera and phone into a resident's room, and they hold a "face-to-face" discussion with an on-call doctor in real time.

Once thought of as a way to give rural nursing home residents and hospital patients access to specialty physicians hundreds of miles away, telemedicine is now an option for frail elderly whose health may be compromised by

moving to a nearby hospital, telemedicine experts say.

Currently, one of the barriers to telemedicine's widespread use in nursing homes is Medicare and Medicaid's lack of reimbursement. Quality-of-care improvements far outweigh the financial considerations, however, Tetreault said.

"For example, our staff now can address pain management issues in a matter of moments instead of several hours," she noted.

PhoneDOCTORx currently is only in Massachusetts, but the company hopes to expand it. ■

Photo: PhoneDOCTORx