

MEDIA RELEASE

Telemedicine use for mental health and psychiatry climbs higher in NE LHIN's drive to increase access to care for Northerners

May 11, 2012 – Using telemedicine for mental health and psychiatry, the North East LHIN facilitated almost 31,000 patient visits last year, connecting record numbers of Northern patients with care and reducing their travel and wait time.

At 61 per cent of all clinical telemedicine activity in the NE LHIN region last year, that's more than four times greater than the next highest uses (internal medicine and oncology), and up from 56 per cent the previous year.

Telemedicine is an eHealth solution that's a critical part of the North East LHIN's plan to improve access to care for all Northeastern Ontarians. It uses two-way videoconferencing through the Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN) to care for patients. The North East is the highest user of the technology among Ontario's 14 LHINs.

"As we heard time and again in our recent community engagement sessions, expanding technologically based solutions is one way to improve access to care for fellow Northerners," says Louise Paquette, CEO, NE LHIN. "As we mark Mental Health Week, it's important to consider innovative ways of providing access to mental health and addictions care, when and where these are needed."

Clinical telemedicine activity in the North East involves mental health and addiction services from Methadone Treatment to Psychogeriatric Assessments, with participation from hospitals, family health teams, community agencies, and long-term care homes.

At the first-ever Northern Telemedicine Forum held last year in Sault Ste. Marie, Ed Brown, head of the Ontario Telemedicine Network, said patients in the Northern Ontario in 2010/11 had avoided more than 61-million kilometres of travel, along with Northern Health Travel costs of more than \$25-million.

FACTS:

- There are 261 active telemedicine sites in our LHIN region, and more sites in development.
- The North East LHIN has the most telemedicine sites of all LHINs in Ontario.

The backgrounder attached provides comments from two health service providers on telemedicine as a welcome addition to care for mental health services.

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Backgrounder: How two NE LHIN health service providers are making use of telemedicine for mental health

We asked Cheryl Fry, Director of Mental Health & Addictions at Weeneebayko Area Health Authority, about telemedicine.

How do you make use of telemedicine for mental health patients?

Here at Weeneebayko we use telemedicine for several purposes for mental health patients. Patients see Psychiatrists for initial and ongoing mental health assessments via OTN. Therapy from Mental Health Staff is offered over OTN to our remote communities as needed, as well as any urgent assessments that might be needed.

Mental Health Staff also use the OTN for patient conferences with the Health Care Team who may be located at different locations throughout the province. This may include the patient and family, or may be a planning session.

Finally, the OTN allows us to access specialists such as pediatric psychiatrists when they are needed for assessment and case management and other specialists such as Forensic Psychiatrists. These types of specialists are not located in our geographical area.

What do you see as the benefits of telemedicine?

We are able to reach our isolated communities to give them better access to mental health care, and to provide more continuity of care. We have no psychiatrists practicing in our area so OTN brings patients in contact with them. When a patient is in treatment out of the area we can set up family conferences and meetings from several sites.

This is convenient for the patients, staff, and saves money. However, it must be acknowledged that many people are uncomfortable seeing themselves on screen while they talk. But once people get used to it, it isn't a problem.

This method of practicing saves us many plane flights, overnight stays, combating bad weather and sitting in airports waiting!

How many years have you been using telemedicine for mental health patients?

We have been using telemedicine for seven years now for mental health.

Any other comments you wish to offer about telemedicine today and tomorrow?

Despite the reluctance of people to talk to the “doctor on the screen” sometimes, I can see nothing but growth for telemedicine. It is so efficient, and yet allows personal enough contact because you can zoom in for close ups and pull back the camera for larger groups. It is cost effective, and allows us to reach so many more people. This will continue as the province continues to restrict budgets more and more. Even our most remote clients are getting used to more technology in their lives, and so the comfort with OTN will increase.

We asked Dr. Ramamohan Veluri, Ruth McMillan Centre, Sudbury, about telemedicine. He has been using it in his practice for the past 18 months.

As a physician with a Sudbury-based practice, how do you make use of telemedicine for mental health patients?

Ontario Telemedicine Network has helped me and my patients immensely and the advantages of this cannot be over-emphasized. Being in the central part of Northeastern Ontario and having a number of patients in distant communities around, it was customary for patients to travel here to attend the appointments. Sometimes patients travelled long distances for only a 20 minutes appointment. Some of my patients moved away from the Sudbury area either for school or work and they still used to come to see me once every three to four months.

These patients came from as far as Toronto, Ottawa and Kapuskasing. It was very time consuming and dangerous to drive in the winter months.

In the past one and a half years since I have had the Ontario Telemedicine Network in my office many of my patients do not travel. In fact, one of my patients from a town on Manitoulin Island literally walks 300 feet from her house to the local clinic to see me on Ontario Telemedicine Network. I can see all my patients who have moved away to far off distances through Telemedicine. I had a student in Ottawa who was going to university and she did not have to miss classes and spend a lot of money to come all the way to see me here.

Many patients welcome Telemedicine because of the many advantages.

I have even seen patients who were admitted to hospitals in small towns which were a distance from Sudbury. It allows me to provide consultation and advise the physician regarding treatment plans which facilitates early improvement and discharge of the patient from the local hospital. If Ontario Telemedicine facilities were not present, the same patient would have to be transferred by ambulance or air ambulance to Sudbury and would be in hospital for some time, away from his/her family.



Dr. Ramamohan Veluri from the Ruth McMillan Centre, Sudbury, sits next to the monitor he uses to connect with his patients using Telemedicine

What do you see as the benefits of telemedicine?

As mentioned above, many patients save time and money and avoid unnecessary travel in winter when driving can be treacherous. Cost of travel is not only the gas money it is also finding someone else to drive them as many patients cannot drive themselves. In other words, travel to Sudbury would also involve possibly inconveniencing of another person to bring the patient all the way to Sudbury. In addition to these conveniences, the availability of service is also an extremely important issue. I saw patients in small communities in the North via telemedicine. For example, I saw a patient from as far as Wawa. There was absolutely no way that this patient could have seen a psychiatrist otherwise.

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