

Web-Posted Sep 30, 2006

Technology bridges the language gap

New video conferencing allows interpreters to convey medical needs of non-English-speaking patients to physicians

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The remote control is good for just one channel -- but it is one heckuva program.

The show is Video Medical Interpreting (VMI), and Central Nebraska AHEC (Area Health Education Center) is playing a large role in its establishment.

"Video Medical Interpreting eliminates health care disparities," said Sarah Cunningham, executive director of Central Nebraska AHEC in College Park. "Nebraska is one of the leaders in this nationwide."

VMI is a fairly new health care technology in Nebraska and the country. When a local or regional hospital or health care provider needs an interpreter, at any time of the day or night, they simply turn on the tube and dial in a medical interpreter.

That interpreter becomes available to bridge the language gap through video conferencing, a part of the two-year-old Nebraska Statewide Telehealth Network.

"Anybody in Central Nebraska can receive good health care," Cunningham said. "If language becomes a barrier, we are more than happy to provide an interpreter."

All that is needed to set up and use Video Medical Interpreting is three pieces of equipment: a camera, a monitor and a microphone. The remote control comes in handy, too.

"It's just like using a remote control with a VCR," said Jessica Calderon, one of AHEC's interpreters in Grand Island.

In the past, Spanish-speaking patients often took a bilingual family member along when they required a medical service, sometimes pulling a child out of school. VMI, for the most part, eliminates that.

Central Nebraska AHEC's 10 interpreters serve:

- St. Francis Memorial Health Center and Family Practice in Grand Island.
- Good Samaritan Hospital in Kearney.
- Aurora Memorial Hospital.
- Mary Lanning Memorial Hospital and the Community Health Center in Hastings.
- Columbus Community Hospital.

AHEC's current roster of interpreters, or their parents, includes natives of Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Argentina and Paraguay. One is a self-taught bilingual Anglo.

At present, obstetrics and the emergency room require interpreters most often. Admissions is another area of need.

"An interpreter can be an angel over a patient's shoulders," Cunningham said.

"It's a gratifying feeling to help someone get access to health care when they need it," Calderon added.

Central Nebraska AHEC's office had just three employees when it opened in 2001. Because of VMI and a burgeoning need for interpreters and translators in the medical field, that number is now 13.

Central Nebraska AHEC serves 38 counties, including the cities of Grand Island, Columbus, Hastings, Kearney, North Platte, McCook and Holdrege.

Sometime in the future, Video Medical Interpreting will be available to all Nebraskans in the 38-county area.

VMI is a large part of AHEC's mission, but there is much more. Through education and outreach, the agency is creating awareness among high school students of the many health care career opportunities.

Students can seize those opportunities, and earn medical degrees, right here in the Grand Island area -- through CCC telecommunications classes, training opportunities through the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Internet resources.

"You don't have to leave Central Nebraska to do it," said Deb Brennan of Grand Island, dean of health occupations at Central Community College. "UNMC is really trying to address rural health concerns."