

Teledermatology at LCMH

LAWRENCEVILLE - One of the most common applications of telemedicine is teledermatology, which has been in place at Lawrence County Memorial Hospital since early this month.

In teledermatology, telecommunication technologies are used to exchange medical information concerning skin conditions and tumors of the skin over a distance using video, audio and data communication. So, even though there is no dermatologist in Lawrence County, residents still have access to skin care.

Patients will go to the Specialty Clinic on the second floor of the hospital, where they will have a televisit with Dr. Stephen Stone, a representative of Southern Illinois University Medicine.

Gene Allen, Lawrence County Memorial Hospital Primary Care Clinic manager, said having a teledermatology appointment is as simple as visiting a doctor. Currently, Dr. Stone is visiting with patients at LCMH on Wednesdays.

“Someone may come in with a rash, or a skin-related issue,” Allen said. “We’ll call to SIU to schedule an appointment with Dr. Stone. They’ll get an appointment time, go to the Specialty Clinic and see the doctor via computer.”

The room at LCMH is equipped with two high-definition cameras. One is for Dr. Stone to see the patient, and the other is used to zoom in on the afflicted area. A nurse in the room is able to take high-definition photographs of the area, as well, and provide them to the doctor. At the same time, the patient is able to view Dr. Stone from a camera in his office, for purposes of communication. It also has a special blue background, which makes it even easier for Dr. Stone to get a good look.

“The detail on the cameras is unbelievable,” Allen said. “The first patient we had was amazed with the technology.”

The most obvious advantage to teledermatology for someone in Lawrence County is that distance is eliminated. A patient does not have to travel to Vincennes or Evansville to visit the specialist.

“And with a lot of dermatologists, you have to wait four to six months to get an appointment,” Allen said. “Our patients will be able to be seen in a timely manner and get it taken care of.”

Furthermore, should Dr. Stone decide that tests are necessary, they can also be done at Lawrence County Memorial Hospital.

“If Dr. Stone decides there needs to be a biopsy, it can be done right here with our general surgeon, Dr. (Faris) AL-Gebory,” he said. “They work hand in hand with the primary care provider to get things taken care of without having to leave the county.”

Prescriptions, if necessary, can also result from the televisit. Dr. Stone can order them, and they can be picked up at the patient's pharmacy of choice. In addition, the visits are covered by Medicare, and insurance applies just like a regular visit to a doctor. LCMH will "pre-certify" the visit with the patient's insurance company in advance, to ensure that everything is taken care of.

Allen notes that LCMH will likely expand in the area of telemedicine. Already the hospital is offering telepsychiatry. More specialties, such as telecardiology and teleneurology may be coming.

The hospital has applied for grants to help cover the expense that comes with the technology. However, it's also committed thousands of dollars.

"It's all about preventive care," Allen said. "Telemedicine is becoming more and more popular in rural areas, with the lack of physicians available. The state is starting to push telehealth."

It's already happening in Lawrence County, and it's probably only the beginning.

To make a teledermatology appointment at LCMH, Allen says one should contact their primary health provider.