

# Telepsychiatry taking off in Lawrence County

LAWRENCEVILLE — A new telepsychiatry program at Lawrence County Memorial Hospital is proving to be both successful and popular.

Started earlier this year in partnership with the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, through modern technology, patients can visit with Chicago psychiatrist Dr. Caroline A. Loeb on a weekly basis at the hospital's Primary Care Clinic.

Currently, Lawrence County patients can visit with Loeb each Thursday morning through the telepsychiatry program, although hours may be expanded in the future.

"It's gone over very well," said Gene Allen, Primary Clinic manager, who noted that May is Mental Health Month in the United States. "Patients will come meet with Dr. Loeb in a special psychiatric room. The psychiatrist can adjust their medications, talk with them about how they're feeling, what troubles they're having, etc. So far, the results have been good."

Loeb, who has nearly 25 years' experience in the field, works mainly at her private practice in Chicago. Currently, Lawrence County is the only place where she's taking part in telepsychiatry.

"It seems like (telemedicine) is the most efficient way for rural areas to receive health care," she said. "In rural areas, there are good primary care doctors but not a lot of specialists. This is a good way to get the patients the help they need."

Chris Creech, a Registered Nurse and Coordinator of Telehealth at the Hospital, says the success of the program can already be measured with available statistics.

Not long ago, the emergency room at the hospital would average nearly a visit a day from someone needing psychiatric help.

"It would range in all kinds of diagnosis, depression, anxiety, suicide attempts," she said. "For any of those patients, it would be an eight-hour stay in the emergency room. Counselors would have to be contacted and different things like that. They'd be in the ER for a full shift."

Now, according to Creech, emergency room visits that are psychiatric in nature, are down to a handful each month.

"We're seeing just a few of those patients a month," she said. "Since telepsych started, I've seen a big improvement. They've all told me they're glad the service is here."

Loeb admits that there are a few drawbacks. However, once she's able to develop a relationship, which usually doesn't take long, the disadvantages are easily overcome.

"Not being in the room with someone, there are obviously cues you're not picking up on, certain body gestures," she said. "But in terms of how it feels once I get used to speaking to a patient and developing a relationship with them, I think it's actually very effective."

Allen stresses that implementing the program has proven to be a benefit to the primary care physicians, as well.

"Around southern Illinois there's such a lack of psychiatric doctors, our medical doctors are the ones who are having to adjust the medications (for psychiatric patients)," he said. "Sometimes they're not real comfortable with that, because that's not their specialty. So having a specialized doctor available, who can adjust those medications helps the providers. It's a win-win. It takes a lot of pressure off those regular providers."

Additionally, Loeb is available to the providers, should they have questions about a specific patient.

“They can call her and get their answer,” he said. “They can better take care of their own patients.”

The visits with Loeb are conducted in a specially prepared, remodeled room at the Primary Care Clinic. The room is equipped with noise-reducing mats as well as a white-noise machine. It also contains special lighting and walls, which enables the patient and Loeb to better see each other.

Allen adds that the visit can be held in private, but if the patient wishes, a nurse can also be present. Additionally, family members are encouraged to take part in the visit, should the patient choose.

“All of the patients have said that they’re glad this service is here,” he said. “They say that if not for this service, they’d have to travel, maybe for an hour or more. We couldn’t be happier with the results.”

Patients who would like more information about the program can reach the clinic at 618-943-7214.

v Chris Creech, a Registered Nurse and Coordinator of Telehealth at Lawrence County Memorial Hospital, speaks with Dr. Caroline A. Loeb recently. Loeb provides weekly visits to Lawrence County patients through telepsychiatry.

