

Opinion: Telemedicine changing health care

By Ann Truscott

Expanding access to health care in rural communities requires innovation and collaboration. In remote areas like South Lake Tahoe with smaller populations, residents still expect high quality care and individual medical needs vary widely.

To increase specialty medical services available in our community, with consideration that unique medical conditions may not have the demand for a local office, Barton Health launched telemedicine in 2009.

Telemedicine, or telehealth, is an exchange of medical information through electronic communication. Saving time and gas money, a patient can conveniently see a specialist from a distant location. Using a live video stream, a specialist at another location discusses the patient's medical condition and views the patient's medical records, vitals, images, and other pertinent information electronically. All appointments and documents are kept confidential and transmitted over a secure network.

Telemedicine technology expands the spectrum of care. Without leaving town, a patient receives specialized care and continuity with his or her current care plan. Local medical providers play an active role in the process and expand their own skills. This patient-centered approach helps meet the patients immediate health needs, leading to more successful outcomes.

All Barton Telemedicine consultations take place with licensed medical providers. It is also reimbursed by most health insurance carriers and Medicare. Barton Telemedicine providers are located at larger medical centers, like UC Davis and UC

San Diego. Barton also has arrangements with smaller practice providers from Truckee, Roseville, and Bakersfield. Current specialties available include cardiology, dermatology, endocrinology, infectious diseases, neurology, oncology, and psychiatry.

Barton has been recognized as a leader in telehealth services in California. In its fifth year, Barton hosts between 150 and 200 consults each month between Barton Memorial Hospital, skilled nursing, the emergency department, and five physician offices. Barton staff holds trainings for rural communities on how to integrate Telehealth and Barton Telemedicine received the California Telehealth Network Award for "Community Collaboration" in 2013.

Telemedicine continues to evolve and expand. In 2012, Barton was instrumental in encouraging the Federal Communications Commission to allocate funds for broadband access to rural areas and promote the expansion of telehealth services. To cover costs, Barton has received grants and mini-grants to grow the program. Future projects include neonatology consults with UC Davis Medical Center and a Telehealth reimbursement grant to identify costs and savings associated with the expansion of remote services.

For more information and complete list of services available with Barton Telemedicine, contact your local primary care provider or visit bartonhealth.org/telehealth.

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