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Interior Health Celebrates 10th Anniversary of Telehealth

Every day, patients across Interior Health access medical care without ever having to travel to meet with their specialists. This time-saving service is made possible through telehealth, which links patient and health care provider through technology.

This month, Interior Health is marking an important milestone – the 10th anniversary of the introduction of telehealth. On Dec. 15-16, 2003, the first Telehealth videoconference consultations in IH took place when Kelowna-based surgeons from the B.C. Thoracic Surgery Program linked with patients in Cranbrook and Trail to conduct initial surgical assessments and post-operative follow ups. Thoracic surgery is treatment for serious illness of the lung or throat.

In the decade since, nearly 11,300 thoracic patients have received telehealth care at 54 different hospitals and health care sites, saving patients more than 8.4 million kilometres in travel to appointments – the equivalent of 211 trips around the world. The program has reached beyond Interior Health to patients in communities throughout B.C., including approximately 2,500 from Northern Health.

“Telehealth technology helps ensure that patients have access to high-quality health care services they need without travelling hundreds of kilometres to access specialist services,” says Health Minister Terry Lake. “For patients and families who live outside major centres, this program can make a big difference by supporting faster diagnoses and better health outcomes.”

Interior Health is a telehealth leader and was an early adopter of the technology. IH offers telehealth in three ways: through direct patient consultation via videoconferencing, the upload of photographs to a health authority-wide system, or through Home Health monitoring, where patients “check in” from their homes. Since its introduction, the telehealth program has grown to include more than 20 different medical fields, with nearly 55,000 patient uses per year throughout Interior Health. This includes everything from surgical consults, to wound treatment, to renal care.

“Telehealth technology has changed the way Interior Health is able to deliver health care, and its use continues to grow,” says Interior Health Board Chair Norman Embree. “Today, 30 per cent of all thoracic practice in Interior Health is performed via telehealth. I’m proud to say that this success has been recognized across the province. In fact, the tele-thoracic program was recognized in 2009 with a HEABC Top Innovator Gold Apple Award.”

Dr. Michael Humer of Kelowna was one of the thoracic surgeons who, along with his colleague Dr. Bill Nelems, performed the first telehealth consultations a decade ago. Dr. Humer says telehealth supports patients and physicians in their own communities and streamlines patient care when they come for surgery in Kelowna.

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“We are excited to celebrate 10 years of the tele-thoracic program. Providing prompt access to thoracic surgical consultations for rural patients in remote communities is one of the best things we do,” says Dr. Humer. “We are able to perform scheduled consultations, but we are also able to assess patients who need urgent or emergency care. In the past, they would have only been able to access that care by physically travelling to see a physician. To now have the ability to reach us virtually is what’s best for the patient, no matter where they live.”

Patients are able to reach beyond Interior Health, as well. For instance, patients with high-risk pregnancies are able to consult with physicians at B.C. Children’s and Women’s Hospital in Vancouver via tele-ultrasounds.

“Telehealth is a true patient-centric service. It reduces the patients’ burden of travel and helps to equalize their access to specialty and other health care services,” says Mal Griffin, Chief Information Officer for Interior Health. “Health professionals benefit, as well. Telehealth improves access to continuing medical education and to a second opinion when one is needed. This helps reduce the isolation of health care professionals working in rural and remote communities.”

Telehealth is also an environmentally friendly way of providing service. The tele-thoracic service alone has helped reduce greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 2,160 tonnes of carbon dioxide, which is akin to taking about 450 vehicles off the road.

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See Backgrounder for additional information
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Backgrounder: Telehealth Services within Interior Health

What is telehealth?

Telehealth connects health care providers and patients over distance through the use of information and communication technology. It also allows clinicians to provide support to their colleagues in rural areas.

How is it offered?

Interior Health offers Telehealth in three ways. Most commonly known is the synchronous service, which is real-time videoconferencing. However, telehealth also includes an asynchronous service, which is the uploading of wound pictures to a system that is accessible by physicians and staff from one end of IH to the other. Telehealth also includes Home Health monitoring, where patients check in from their homes, keeping with IH’s philosophy that the home, with appropriate supports, is the best place to recover from illness and injury and manage chronic conditions.

Examples of telehealth services offered in Interior Health:

Cardiac  Pathology
Diabetes  Pediatric Epilepsy
Endocrinology  Pulmonary
Forensic Psychiatry  Rehabilitation
Gastroenterology  Renal Care
Gynecology  Speech Language
High Risk Pregnancy Ultrasound  Stroke
Home Health Monitoring  Thoracic
Mental Health  Urology
Neurology  Wound Treatment
Oncology

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