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Telehealth service improves access to infant hearing test

Cranbrook - A recently introduced telehealth service will help families in the East Kootenay region whose babies may have hearing loss. The service uses videoconferencing technology to link an audiometric technician in Cranbrook with an audiologist at BC Children’s Hospital in Vancouver.

“By bringing the services patients need to them, this new telehealth service reflects our commitment to putting the patient at the centre of care, no matter where in the province they live,” said Health Minister Terry Lake. “The technology being introduced in Cranbrook will help ensure that some of the youngest patients and their families are able to have the hearing testing they require without leaving their home communities.”

In conducting the Auditory Brainstem Response (ABR) test, the technician meets the family at the Cranbrook Health Centre and prepares the baby by placing the sensors and inserting earphones. The audiologist in Vancouver is patched in via videoconference and computer to conduct the test, review and interpret results, and provide the family with those results shortly after.

“As a parent there’s nothing more important than ensuring our kids have access to the care they need to help them thrive,” said Kootenay East MLA Bill Bennett. “This new telehealth service will be a huge relief to families whose babies may be experiencing hearing loss and will help ensure they get their testing and results without having to travel.”

The introduction of the telehealth services means more patient-centred care and improved access for infants in the East Kootenay region, through increased schedule flexibility. While previously an audiologist made a trip from Trail around once a month on a set day to conduct the test in Cranbrook, the test can now be scheduled by patient need more often and at varying times.

The ABR hearing assessment is part of the BC Early Hearing Program, a province-wide screening program to check hearing in babies born in B.C. The program provides newborn hearing screening, follow-up hearing assessments, a first set of hearing aids, and early language services and family supports.

“Between three to six babies out of 1,000 are born with hearing loss in one or both ears. Without early screening, hearing loss may go undetected until later in childhood. Even if no one in your family has hearing loss, it is important to have your baby’s hearing screened,” said Diane Bremner, Acting Director of the BC Early Hearing Program.

Within the Interior Health region, approximately 135 diagnostic ABR tests are completed each year.

“It’s important that we are able to administer this test by three months of age to infants. Early interventions are recommended by six months of age for children with permanent hearing loss to give infants the best opportunity for reaching normal speech-language, hearing and communication milestones,” said Katie Young, Audiology Professional Practice Lead with Interior Health.

The telehealth ABR service has also been launched in Williams Lake to support families in the Cariboo and Chilcotin region.
For more information about the BC Early Hearing Program visit www.phsa.ca.

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