

Technology Connecting CarolinaEast Patients with Off-site Neurologists

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Doctors, nurses and staff in CarolinaEast Medical Center's department of emergency medicine are turning to technology to help fill a gap in their medical staff roster.

Since May, the hospital has contracted with a company called Specialists On Call that connects neurologists with patients using video conferencing technology.

Many of the neurologists who have worked with CarolinaEast patients and staff have been from New

Jersey, although they can be located across the country, according to Megan McGarvey, CarolinaEast's director of public relations.

They do patient exams and physician consultations through an approximately 5-foot-tall computer screen on wheels that is attached to a video camera. There are protocols in place to ensure the security of the exchange, McGarvey said.

"It's just as good as physician being here," she said.

The hospital does not have a neurologist on staff, although it has been heavily recruiting one, said Dr. Terry Hensley, medical director and chairman of CarolinaEast's emergency department.

He said there's a need for a neurologist, which is a physician that can diagnose and treat illnesses of the nervous system, in emergency situations. He said neurological complaints like headaches or stroke are fairly common at CarolinaEast.

And while there are neurologists working in New Bern, the hospital needs a neurologist that can respond immediately to emergencies such as strokes.

"The other compounding factor is there's a national shortage of neurologists that are willing to work in hospitals. Most of them prefer to work in office practices," Hensley said. "So we had to bridge that gap somehow."

He said physicians in the department might consult the teleneurologist if a patient needs a special treatment like "clot-busting drugs" like thrombolytic drugs for strokes, or in making a diagnosis or figuring out a treatment.

Sometimes the neurologist conducts a patient exam by asking questions or directing the patient to do certain tasks, and sometimes the neurologist asks the nursing staff to help test the patient, said Deb Rogers, a registered nurse and the clinical manager of the department.

“He’s doing an exam, just like when you go to your doctor, same thing, they’re just doing it with a little bit of third party help through a different kind of medium,” Rogers said.

Hensley said the use of telecommunications technology in the practice of medicine — called telemedicine — is not necessarily new. He said he saw it when he was a resident 10 years ago, but he said it’s been “looking for a cause.” It’s typically used in more rural areas, and he believes there’s a greater demand for it with neurologists.

CarolinaEast is not alone in its use of telemedicine to serve area residents. Easter Seals United Cerebral Palsy North Carolina and Virginia — which provides services for people with mental health, substance abuse issues and intellectual and developmental disabilities — has used telemedicine to connect psychiatrists with patients in New Bern and in Bayboro.

Jean Kenefick, community director for the nonprofit for Craven, Jones, Pamlico, Onslow and Carteret counties, said the nonprofit is revamping its telepsychiatry program and is moving toward using it as a consulting service for its patients’ primary care physicians.

“You do have the rural areas that do not have specialists, and yet they need that specialist’s care,” McGarvey said, adding that she believes telemedicine is a growing part of health care delivery. “So you’re able to actually provide this level of care.”

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