

Video conferencing helps improve lives and supports distance education

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Baycrest is building a reputation as the “go to” organization for sharing its clinical and educational expertise in elder care using state-of-the-art videoconferencing technology. The technology allows doctors and other health-care professionals to meet “virtually” to learn from each other. It’s also a cost- and time-efficient way to support health-care delivery to patients located hundreds – often thousands – of miles away from the nearest city. Baycrest’s expanding tele-education and tele-health services are reaching distant Ontario communities as well as countries around the globe.



Professional isolation can be a challenge for health-care providers practicing in remote areas. One popular outreach program provided by Baycrest psychiatrists supports those who treat and care for older adults suffering from mental illness or dementia. To date, Dr. David Conn, vice-president of Education at Baycrest, has conducted close to 50 video conferenced education sessions with Northern Ontario professionals as well as patient consultations that give seniors in the north “virtual” access to Toronto-based experts in geriatric psychiatry. A typical session would be where a doctor has asked for Dr. Conn’s advice on an elderly patient who has behavioural problems due to Alzheimer’s disease. The patient, their family, the physician and other health professionals may attend the virtual consultation.

“There are no geriatric psychiatrists in our area, so this service from Baycrest is invaluable as it allows seniors with mental illness to be assessed in their own communities rather than have the expense of travel,” notes Sandy Skirten, coordinator of mental health services for older adults in Fort Frances, located in the Kenora-Rainy River district, a vast geographical area in Northern Ontario. “Tele-psychiatry has helped so many of our clients with a serious mental illness. Without it they would have suffered needlessly for the remainder of their lives.”

Going Global

Beyond Canada, Baycrest’s most notable achievement in videoconferencing has been the popular monthly behavioural neurology rounds – formal meetings at which physicians and other health professionals discuss the clinical case of one or more patients – provided by the Division of Neurology at the University of Toronto, with partners in the Middle East. The rounds are co-chaired by Baycrest’s Dr. Morris Freedman and Dr. Sandra Black of Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and are supported by The Peter A. Silverman Global eHealth Program and the Canadian International Scientific Exchange Program (CISEPO).

The rounds bring together Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian colleagues with their Canadian peers in a collegial forum to discuss complex neurological cases. South Africa, the United States, Switzerland, Scotland and China have also participated.

“The international behavioural neurology rounds have set a new and higher standard, demonstrating Canada’s leadership and recognizing Baycrest for international telehealth,” says Dr. Freedman.

The real value of videoconferencing is that it builds relationships, explains Tim Patterson, director of the Telehealth Program at Baycrest. “Health care is a common language of need, regardless of a country’s

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politics, culture or religion. In today's volatile world, we need to find a way to bridge differences, and exchanging health-care knowledge fills that gap."

The international medical rounds are a small but important contribution to global peace-building efforts, notes Dr. Conn. However, he points out that the primary objective is "to help health-care professionals, no matter where they live in the world, to assist their aging clients in optimizing health and wellbeing. Videoconferencing allows us to do this in a very cost-effective way."

In addition to mental health, Baycrest has provided interdisciplinary distance education on a wide range of topics, including dysphasia (difficulty with swallowing), clinical ethics, post-stroke management, and cancer pain management. It has also produced events for the Ontario Health Libraries Association and the Government of Ontario.