Baycrest delivers expertise around the world using videoconferencing

BY KELLY CONNELLY

TORONTO — Baycrest is building a reputation as the ‘go to’ organization for delivering clinical and professional development expertise in the care of aging adults using videoconferencing.

The technology has given Baycrest the ability to reach distant communities, including global hotspots, without the travel costs. Its virtual patient consult services and professional training in elder care to remote healthcare sites in Ontario are in high demand, and its interdisciplinary distance education and international medical rounds are no longer unique events, but regular occurrences and highly regarded in the global community.

The word is out that this academic health sciences centre — internationally renowned for its care of aging adults, cognitive neuroscience and treatments for mood, stroke and memory disorders — is extending its professional reach and goodwill to countries around the world with broadcast quality production and technology that transcends political borders and historic tensions.

One of Baycrest’s most notable global achievements in videoconferencing has been the monthly Division of Neurology, University of Toronto Behavioural Neurology Rounds with partners in the volatile Middle East.

The rounds are co-chaired by Drs. Morris Freedman (Baycrest) and Sandra Black (Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre). The Peter A. Silverman Global eHealth Program and the Canadian International Scientific Exchange Program (CISEPO) provide vital support for the program, which brings together Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian medical colleagues with Canadian peers in a forum to discuss complex neurological cases.

Other countries that have joined the rounds include South Africa, the United States and Switzerland (via the World Health Organization), with Scotland and China also participating this academic year.

“The International Behavioural Neurology Rounds have set a new and higher standard, demonstrating Canada’s leadership and the recognition of Baycrest for international telehealth,” says Dr. Freedman, who received the Colin R. Woolf Award for Excellence in Course Coordination in 2008 from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, in recognition of his role organizing the rounds.

The real value of telehealth at its most elemental level is in relationship building, explains Tim Patterson, Baycrest’s telehealth coordinator. “Healthcare is a common language of need, regardless of a country’s politics, culture and religion. In today’s volatile world, we need to find a way to bridge differences — and exchanging healthcare knowledge fills that gap.”

The international medical rounds are a small but important contribution to global peace-building efforts, notes Dr. David Conn, Baycrest’s vice-president of medical services and academic education. However, he emphasizes that Baycrest’s primary objective with videoconferencing capability is to disseminate knowledge and tools that will have an impact on the aging process.

“We want to help healthcare 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,” says Dr. Conn, an expert in seniors’ mental health who has conducted close to 50 tele-education sessions with Northern Ontario healthcare professionals, as well as patient consults. The virtual consults allow patients in remote Ontario communities to have access to some of the best doctors in geriatric psychiatry without having to make the long hike to Toronto.

In 2006, Dr. Conn chaired the organizing committee for the International Psychogeriatric Association’s (IPA) first, live international telehealth videoconference on mental health challenges in the elderly. The session was broadcast from Baycrest to medical colleagues as far away as Brazil, Argentina, Ireland and Romania. In early September, he received the 2009 Distinguished Service to the Congress Host Country Award from the IPA for his contribution to the field of psychogeriatrics over many years.

In addition to mental health, Baycrest has hosted interdisciplinary distance education across a wide range of topics, including dysphasia, 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.

Last year, the Toronto Central LHIN used Baycrest’s videoconferencing for a full-day, multi-site conference on Aging at Home.

Baycrest, along with U of T’s Division of Neurology and St. Michael’s Hospital, is currently exploring the idea of starting neurology residency rounds via videoconferencing with residents in Jordan, Russia and Cuba.

Both Dr. Freedman and Mr. Patterson received the Stephen W. Herbert Award for Excellence in Education last spring for their leadership and coordination of Baycrest’s telehealth initiatives that promote interdisciplinary distance education.

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