

TCH Telemedicine Technology that works



Being able to use telemedicine rather than traveling to the Twin Cities for specialist appointments means Ken Kneisl is home more often, leading an active lifestyle. Besides hunting and fishing with his daughters and friends, he enjoys spending times with his dogs, Zoe and Gator.

“It was just like he was in the room.”

Ken Kneisl explained about his first telemedicine visit.



Telemedicine specialists can view injuries enlarged to see detail.

Construction worker and Wadena firefighter Ken Kneisl doesn't take throwing a stick for his dogs for granted. Identical scars on each shoulder record two surgeries he underwent to regain motion and eliminate pain.

Six years ago, when his ladder slipped, Ken stretched to catch himself. He heard something rip — his left arm's bicep tendon and rotator cuff. The carpenter with Mark Stone Construction was in pain, but toughed it out for four years before seeking medical help.

When he did, he found himself on television — actually a monitor in the Tri-County Hospital telemedicine department — after a referral from his doctor, Matt Yelle, M.D. Ken met surgeon Michael Freehill, M.D. for the first time on screen. Dr. Freehill was at the University of Minnesota. Ken was in Wadena at TCH.

“It was just like he was with me in the room,” Ken said. His physical therapist, Theresa Howe, was with him and gave the doctor the details about Ken's range of motion and strength. It turned out to be the first of many visits via TCH telemedicine.

Ken is in good company. According to the telemedicine department manager, Robin Klemek, RN, over 70 patients per month meet with several specialists through TCH telemedicine services.

TELEMEDICINE LEADERS

Klemek, who has been with TCH for 26 years, recalled that she was surprised to learn she had been selected to coordinate telemedicine when TCH received its first grant with the University of Minnesota in 1994. TCH was one of the first Minnesota hospitals to use the technology.

“I couldn't program a VCR,” Klemek said with a laugh. While the technical equipment — with many components — overwhelmed her at first, the concept did not. She was an experienced emergency room nurse and familiar with all types of medical specialties.

“We had specialists coming here, so it made sense,” Klemek said. With telemedicine, doctors could “see” patients anytime. She also recognized the opportunity to increase the number of specialties available for patient access.

Though there were some frustrations with technological connections early on, telemedicine quickly became a staple at TCH. Robin pointed out that Wadena is fortunate to be a hub for the most advanced communication technology.

Two major upgrades later, patients at TCH can be seen by specialists in any other facility that has the same technology, through a secure

and private connection. Klemek and her staff use various cameras to zoom in on patients from head to toe as well as inside ears, nose and throat. Cameras also magnify, brighten and sharpen X-rays on a document viewer for an offsite specialist to review.

As a leader in telemedicine in Minnesota, TCH is in its fifth year teaching staff from other hospitals about the technology. Klemek often hears, “if you want to learn telemedicine, go to Wadena.”

ADVANTAGES

The majority of telemedicine visits are with orthopedic and dermatology specialists. Patients like Ken do pre-operative and post-operative visits in Wadena.

“The biggest advantage is that you don't have to drive to the Twin Cities,” Ken said, noting it was painful for him to ride in any vehicle. He traveled to the Fairview University Medical Center in Minneapolis for the surgery, and used telemedicine for follow-up visits.

The third most common use is for child psychiatric sessions. With remote camera control, a specialist can follow a hyperactive child around the TCH telemedicine room. Plus, there is always a parent or staff person with every patient.

Klemek is no longer surprised



Ken and Lori Kneisl are pleased with the care they received from Tri-County Hospital after surgeries on both shoulders. Ken Kneisl works for Mark Stone Construction (23 years) and serves as a Wadena firefighter (17 years).

“It’s so much nicer here. It’s stress free.”

Ken Kneisl about Tri-County Hospital

Tri-County Hospital’s Telemedicine staff: (l-r) sitting, Rita Anderson, LPN, Robin Klemek, Telemedicine/Outreach Manager, RN, Medley Shamp, LPN; standing, Mary Houle, RN and Lynae Maki, LPN.

about what specialty telemedicine can be used for: rheumatology, wound clinics, a pediatric geneticist, and even urology and gastroenterology are just a few of 16 specialties currently available. In some cases the specialist can’t examine the patient, but can ask questions and make an evaluation — saving the patient a trip to Minneapolis/St. Paul.

“We work with excellent doctors,” Klemek said, adding that rare disorders have been diagnosed by specialists using telemedicine at TCH.

When a doctor sees something he doesn’t like, he immediately orders a lab test or schedules an office visit. Besides scheduled appointments, telemedicine is used for emergencies and the system can be taken throughout the hospital, even to patient rooms.

“This keeps our local doctors in the loop,” Klemek said. Doctor referrals are required for telemedicine, and the local doctor receives follow-up notes and recommendations after telemedicine visits.

“Everybody wins,” Klemek said. “Patients get the problem fixed and don’t have travel long distances. Our doctors get information right away, and specialists don’t have to drive or fly out here, so they have more time to meet with more patients.” The benefits of saving time and money in travel extends to the

hospital too. Administrator Dennis Miley and other managers use the technology instead of driving to attend distant meetings. The physicians, nurses and hospital staff receive educational opportunities through the network for continuing professional education.

MORE TV TIME

Telemedicine saved Ken many road trips. He and physical therapist Theresa Howe visited Dr. Freehill again in 2006 with a 2-inch rotator cuff tear and a full tendon tear on his right shoulder, after he made a wrong twist while throwing plywood scraps into a bin.

“He learned. That time he went in the same day,” said Lori Kneisl, Ken’s wife. Though the location of the telemedicine department had changed in the new hospital facility, Ken knew in the routine. Orthopedic treatment worked so well, he also started using telemedicine to meet with a dermatologist for psoriasis.

After traveling out of town for years to meet with a dermatologist without good results, Ken says he is now on a treatment that is working — with a dermatologist he’s only met through the telemedicine monitor.

The Kneisls’ three daughters have also used telemedicine to meet with orthopedic and dermatology specialists.

Lori — the only family member not to use telemedicine — has taken family members to appointments, and said she is impressed with the quality of the pictures and the high magnification to pick up small details. She added that there is good communication between the specialist and therapist. She recalled how Ken “negotiated” permission from his surgeon to hunt with a crossbow, with Theresa’s help. At the same time, Ken had to answer to Howe that he was doing his exercises.

Because of the technology, Ken says he was able to keep working and to be around Wadena.

“I walk in that door and everybody knows me,” he said with a laugh. “It’s so much nicer here. It’s stress free. Because you know the people, you’re more comfortable.” ■

