



Telemedicine Redefined

BY TOM YORK



UCLA's Center for Inflammatory Bowel Diseases has been testing a new medical device for helping patients manage such conditions as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

The device? The iPad.

The doctors, nurses and patients are using the wildly popular wireless tablet from Apple Computer to track symptoms and care and then communicate that critical data to each other in an ongoing dialogue.

"It's like having a doctor in your back pocket," says Dr. Daniel Hommes, president of medicine at UCLA and director of the inflammatory center.

Hommes said such devices as the iPad can improve care while saving costs in the health care landscape of the future.

The program even goes so far as to provide near real-time traffic reports before patients head out for appointments to avoid delays.

Based on the success of its pilot, UCLA said, it is enrolling 250 patients into the program over the next few months. And Hommes says his team of experts is planning to expand to other chronic disease areas.

The UCLA pilot is but one of many similar efforts under way in Los Angeles County using new technologies to change the way medicine is practiced in the exam room and at the bedside.

While the trend can be partially attributed to the push by the federal government to digitize patient health care records and bring health care into the 21st century, it also can be directly attributed to ongoing efforts to drive down costs while bettering patient care.

It's a trend driven by the latest generation of doctors entering the profession who favor wireless devices, such as the iPhone and the iPad, over the clipboard and pen.

Today's 20- and 30-somethings have grown up with all of the advances in consumer technology over the past two decades and wouldn't live without the ease and convenience of that easily accessible technology in the workplace.

To be sure, the technology-driven changes impacting medicine don't necessarily involve "the next big thing" in gadgets and gizmos. Doctors are finding new uses for older technology, too, which is making their lives easier as well as the patients' lives.

The Southside Coalition of Community Health Centers, for instance, is repurposing telemedicine, once used by doctors in remote clinics, for use in a densely populated urban setting.

The doctors and technicians at St. John's Well Child and Family Center in South Los Angeles take digital images of the retinas of diabetic patients and transmit the images via the Internet to specialists in Northern California, who then determine if the eyesight of the patients are worsening.

Before the clinic installed the telemedicine equipment, patients made appointments months in advance in distant locations and, in doing so, packed already crowded waiting rooms to see the limited number of ophthalmologists available.

Southside Coalition executives say their urban adaption of telemedicine won't replace office visits altogether, but it's a technology that's going to become more common with the arrival of national health care.

Indeed, the American Telemedicine Association said 10 million patients nationwide benefit from the technology today, compared to 1 million just seven years ago. The number will double in another two years, much of the explosion to be driven by the advent of the Affordable Care Act.

The ACA will greatly increase the number of citizens who will have health care coverage and, hence, access to services that are already in short supply.

The LA County Department of Health Services predicts that as many as 2 million patients will be covered under ACA alone.