

Profiles in Kidney Care – March 2008

TeleRenal Program Improves Care for Patients in Rural Interior Health Communities

People with kidney disease in an increasing number of communities in BC's interior no longer have to travel long distances to see a renal specialist, thanks to Interior Health's TeleRenal Program.

Through the telehealth facilities, Trail nephrologist Dr. Chi Zhang can now conduct virtual office visits with patients in seven rural communities in the East and West Kootenays. Further north, patients in Williams Lake and surrounding communities are also using telehealth facilities to visit remotely with Kamloops nephrologist Dr. Cornel Wijeyesinghe.



"Before this, patients had to drive up to four hours for an appointment with me," says Dr. Wijeyesinghe. "That's next to impossible for someone who is already on dialysis three days a week, and who also faces the challenges of accessing transportation and driving through treacherous winter conditions."

Using videoconferencing equipment, webcams, electronic stethoscopes and readily available digital x-ray and lab data, the telehealth technology enables discussion between patients and their nephrologist about everything from lab results to general health. Using the webcam, the physician can even conduct a physical examination of the patient, with the electronic stethoscope providing an accurate reading of a patient's heart rate.

"With this technology I am able to see more patients," says Dr. Zhang, who notes however that the TeleRenal Program doesn't eliminate the need for in-office visits entirely: "It's still important for me to see a patient in person from time to time."

"I think the initial face-to-face meeting is very important to establish rapport," says Dr. Wijeyesinghe, "but once that has taken place, I find patients are very comfortable with TeleRenal visits."

The TeleRenal Program also lets patients connect remotely with other members of their renal team, including dietitians, social workers and renal nurse specialists. Recently the IH renal nurse



practitioner was approached by Dr. Zhang and the Kootenay renal team to assist at the Kimberly Kidney Care Clinic by triaging the backlog of over 70 new patient referrals. While the nurse practitioner worked at the clinic in Kimberly, Dr. Zhang was available via telehealth facilities for discussion and assistance in clinical decision-making.

“Altogether it’s a very impressive program,” says Dr. Wijeyesinghe. “And it makes good sense in areas of the country where the distances are so great and there is a shortage of health professionals.”

Interior Health is the first and only health authority in the province to offer renal services via telehealth program. With its success to date, it’s no surprise that Interior Health – with 1,500 kidney patients scattered across 215,000 square kilometres across the interior – is now looking at rolling out the program in other rural communities.