

Healthcare IT News

St. Luke's expands telehealth

By *Bernie Monegain, Editor* | 09/01/07 | TELEHEALTH 0907

KANSAS CITY, MO – St. Luke's Health System is planning to expand its existing telemedicine offerings to include additional specialties.

The health system will add ENT, or ear, nose and throat, and urology specialties to its list of other telehealth specialties – cardiology, pulmonary, mental health, and the recently added neurology.

St. Luke's Health System includes 11 hospitals and several practices in the Kansas City metro area and the surrounding region.

The telemedicine program offers patients in rural parts of the state access to specialists in the metro area. It saves both patients and physicians travel time and cost. The savings can be \$80 to \$120 for patients who live 50 miles or more from the metro center, said Steve Kropp, director of outreach services at St. Luke's. And, for most patients, it means less time off work.

Moreover, most patients would have a two or three month wait before seeing a specialist, said Kropp.

Today, clinics focusing on each specialty are held via videoconferencing two to three times a month, beamed to Kansas City from the four remote sites – Trenton, Mo. , Chillicothe, Mo. , Garnett, Kan. and Leavenworth, Kan.

A study of 460 telemedicine patients in Trenton and Chillicothe over 15 months showed they saved \$40,000 in travel costs, according to Kropp.

St. Luke's uses two flat panel screens with cameras on top – and also the add-on tools, such as electronic stethoscope, vital sign monitoring tools and examination cameras.

North Chelmsford, Mass. -based AMD Telemedicine provides those tools for St. Luke's and many other telemedicine programs around the world.

AMD President Steve Normandin says over recent years he's seen telemedicine programs expand from a primary care focus alone to specialties and sub-specialties.

AMD boasts 5,000 installations in 68 countries.

The company has installations in Thailand, Egypt, Mexico Norway, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Yugoslavia and many other locations. It is installing nearly 70 more telemedicine sites to the 50 already established in Kazakhstan, a country that spans 2.7 million kilometers, with a population of 15.2 million.

As at St. Luke's in Kansas City, digital signals are sent from telemedicine devices over a video line. Physicians can see and talk with the patients as well as get detailed information about their conditions – via the devices, such as digital stethoscopes and high-resolution cameras.

Kropp said St. Luke's is looking into expanding its program to hospitals outside its own system – perhaps on a contractual basis. It would be one way to capture a return on investment, he said. While Medicare started reimbursing telemedicine services in 1999, most private payers do not reimburse for the services and most states do not require them to do so.