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## **Hospital plans to help patients see doctors from afar**

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Local urgent-care patients could soon receive quicker treatment through a new telemedicine technology at Regional Medical Center.

The Anniston-based hospital is in the planning stages of setting up a telemedicine network with UAB Hospital in Birmingham. With the equipment in place, UAB physicians can evaluate local patients in real time and determine if they should stay in Anniston or go to Birmingham – meaning possibly faster treatment for patients in critical need and more revenue for RMC. The plan is part of a growing trend in the use of similar technology to offer better health care to more underserved areas across the state, experts say.

Telemedicine involves the use of telecommunication technology to provide health care from a distance. The technology ranges from instant video sharing of X-rays to devices that can show a patient's vital signs in real time to a physician hundreds of miles away.

David McCormack, CEO of RMC, said UAB is looking to use RMC as a test site for a telemedicine network. If successful, the network will be expanded between UAB and other state hospitals.

McCormack said RMC will spend approximately \$70,000 for the necessary telemedicine equipment and begin testing it within the next couple of months. Once the equipment is installed, UAB physicians will be able to check RMC patients in real time.

“They will look at our lab work and images ... they'll look at all of our stuff on site to see if we need to keep patients here or take them over there,” McCormack said.

McCormack said the network will focus only on patients in need of immediate care, such as those with strokes or who have been critically injured. McCormack said RMC regularly transports critical care patients to UAB. With the telemedicine equipment however, RMC can quickly learn if such transports are necessary, saving valuable treatment time for the patients while also keeping more revenue at the hospital.

“This will help patients stay here,” McCormack said.

McCormack added that if the telemedicine network at RMC proves successful, similar equipment will be installed at RMC Jacksonville.

Though telemedicine is not a new field, efforts have ramped up in the past year to expand the use of such technology across the state through the Alabama Partnership of Telehealth. The nonprofit organization was formed last year with the support of Gov. Robert Bentley and Ron Sparks, director of the Rural

Development Office.

Lloyd Sirmons, director of Alabama Partnership of Telehealth, said the agency is modeled after and partnered with a similar agency in Georgia.

Sirmons said the entire network, which includes Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Minnesota, has 300 partners such as medical specialists, hospitals, clinics, schools and nursing homes. Sirmons said his organization is currently focusing on bringing telemedicine to the medically underserved rural areas of Alabama.

“Telemedicine is a rapidly growing industry and with the changes in health care and shortages of physicians in rural areas ... a lot of organizations will have to turn to that technology to get the services that are needed,” Sirmons said.

Mickey Turner, executive director of Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Board, said his agency has used telemedicine equipment for the last two years to provide the bulk of its services, including psychiatric evaluations and medication monitoring. Turner said his agency, located in Anniston, is the main hub where all the doctors work. The agency has five small sites with telemedicine equipment spread out across the two counties, allowing patients to interact with the doctors at the main office.

“It saves money because there is less travel involved and because there is less staff involved,” Turner said of telemedicine. “And it’s easier access for the client.”

Both the doctor and patient sit in front of cameras and computer monitors, allowing for two-way interaction. The doctor can also zoom the camera in on the patient to check for different symptoms, such as self-inflicted wounds or allergic reactions to medication.

Turner noted that the mental health board recently hired a psychiatrist in Gadsden who will be provided telemedicine equipment to see and evaluate patients at all the Calhoun and Cleburne sites.

Dale Quinney, executive director of the Alabama Rural Health Association, said the expansion of telemedicine will have great implications for rural medical care in the state.

“When you look at the fact that we have such shortages of primary care and sub-specialists in rural areas ... telemedicine will negate or at least decrease some of the transportation issues and bring in some services where they have never been available before,” Quinney said.

Quinney said telemedicine will help nursing homes cut down on high ambulance costs and will particularly have an impact on mental health care in rural areas.

“Psychiatric care has not been very available in rural areas,” Quinney said. “Telemedicine is one of the most promising things I can think of for rural health.”

Eta Berner, professor of health administration at UAB who also teaches a class

about telemedicine, said it's still too soon to tell just how much telemedicine will spread in the coming years.

“There are potential advantages to patients in remote places,” Berner said. “But I’m not sure if it’s a financial advantage for the institution ... but the technology is getting cheaper and cheaper.”

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