

New Technology Improves Healthcare in Rural Communities

July 7, 2008 Norfolk, NE - Mother-to-be, Melissa Jensen, (not her real name) visited her OB/GYN in her rural Nebraska community. During her appointment, her doctor discovered that her pregnancy was high risk and told her that she needed to see a Perinatologist in Omaha or Lincoln, NE. Melissa was worried and frightened, as any mother-to-be would be, but her doctor quickly delivered the good news.

His office was equipped with telemedicine equipment that would allow her to be examined by the specialist without ever leaving his office and her insurance would cover it! Her sonogram would be broadcast in the specialist's office in real time and they could consult face-to-face using this sophisticated video technology.

If this sounds like some unbelievable futuristic scenario, welcome to the future.

American Educational Telecommunications (AET) of Norfolk, NE has been providing telemedicine applications worldwide for nearly 10 years. The American Telemedicine Association (ATA) defines telemedicine as the use of medical information exchanged from one site to another via electronic communications to improve patients' health status. AET's COO, Tino Bellanca asserts, "We've been working in telemedicine for 10 years. It's the method of choice when you have the opportunity to provide these kinds of solutions to physicians in rural communities who could not otherwise provide this level of care."

Led by OB/GYN, Dr. Keith Vrbicky, AET uses telemedicine to provide quality healthcare to people in rural or remote communities who might not otherwise have access to the services they need. With telemedicine, patients are able to receive much higher quality medical care including a decrease in travel that can be both risky and expensive, increased access to specialists, and earlier diagnosis which can prevent intervention procedures later. AET is one of the first and early providers of this technology in the state of Nebraska.

While AET is not the only group that provides telemedicine applications, they offer some distinct advantages. "What sets us apart is that our staff is made up of people who have both technical and medical backgrounds," says Dr. Vrbicky. "When we consult with physicians about installing the software and hardware equipment, we can approach it from every angle. We personally understand the needs of the physicians, their support staff, and their patients, as well as the technical requirements."

Before the applications are even set up, AET provides an in-depth evaluation of an office's existing systems to ensure that everything will operate smoothly and seamlessly. Recommendations are customized to each office. No detail is overlooked, from establishing processes and procedures to education and training to assisting with the use of proper coding for insurance.

What makes AET's application unique is that real time ultrasound imaging is broadcast via video conferencing and live conversations between the Perinatologist and patient. Evaluating the infant in real time motion is essential for making a thorough and accurate diagnosis.

Creighton University's Division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine was the first to incorporate the AET program due to the progressive vision of Drs. Alfred D. Fleming, Chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Michael J. Barsoom, Director of the Division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine. According to Dr. Fleming, "It is especially helpful for seeing patients that need weekly consults. This technology does not eliminate outreach clinics by any means. In fact, it facilitates improved collaboration among all parties involved, which ultimately improves the level of healthcare we can provide our patients."

Dr. Barsoom has conducted many consultations and his enthusiasm for this new service is evident. "AET has helped incorporate this service into the workflow of our office, giving us the opportunity to offer our services to more patients who, for a variety of reasons, were otherwise unable to see us in person."

Methodist Perinatal Center in Omaha has adopted the application as well. Dr. Michael Levine, MD understands that patients and physicians alike can be unsure about new methods, but has found AET's telemedicine applications to be invaluable. "I was skeptical at first, but with this equipment, it feels like I'm in the same room with the patient. The quality of the study and consultation is equivalent to a face-to-face evaluation."

Many patients have echoed Dr Levine's sentiments. Sandi Bishop admits, "The first time it was a little strange talking to the Perinatologist on a monitor, but the second time it didn't seem strange at all. While this method seemed a little unusual at first, that absolutely did not outweigh being able to avoid traveling to Omaha."

AET's mission is in reaching the world's rural, remote, and underserved populations by providing quality healthcare through telemedicine. As the demand for educating the consumer on health and wellness continues to grow, AET is addressing this issue through various media such as voice, video, television, and the internet. They believe that telemedicine remains their number one opportunity to significantly improve the standards of medical care available to the people they serve.

Since 1999, American Educational Telecommunications has been an international provider of telemedicine applications including telehealth programming for consumer and professional use. In July of 2008, AET opened an office in the Scott Technology Center on the University of Nebraska's Omaha campus. The company offers telemedicine services in all of the major subspecialties in medicine.

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AET Core Staff

Back row from left to right: Miguel A. Felix, Dedri Wendt, Tino Bellanca

Front row: Dr. Keith W. Vrbicky