

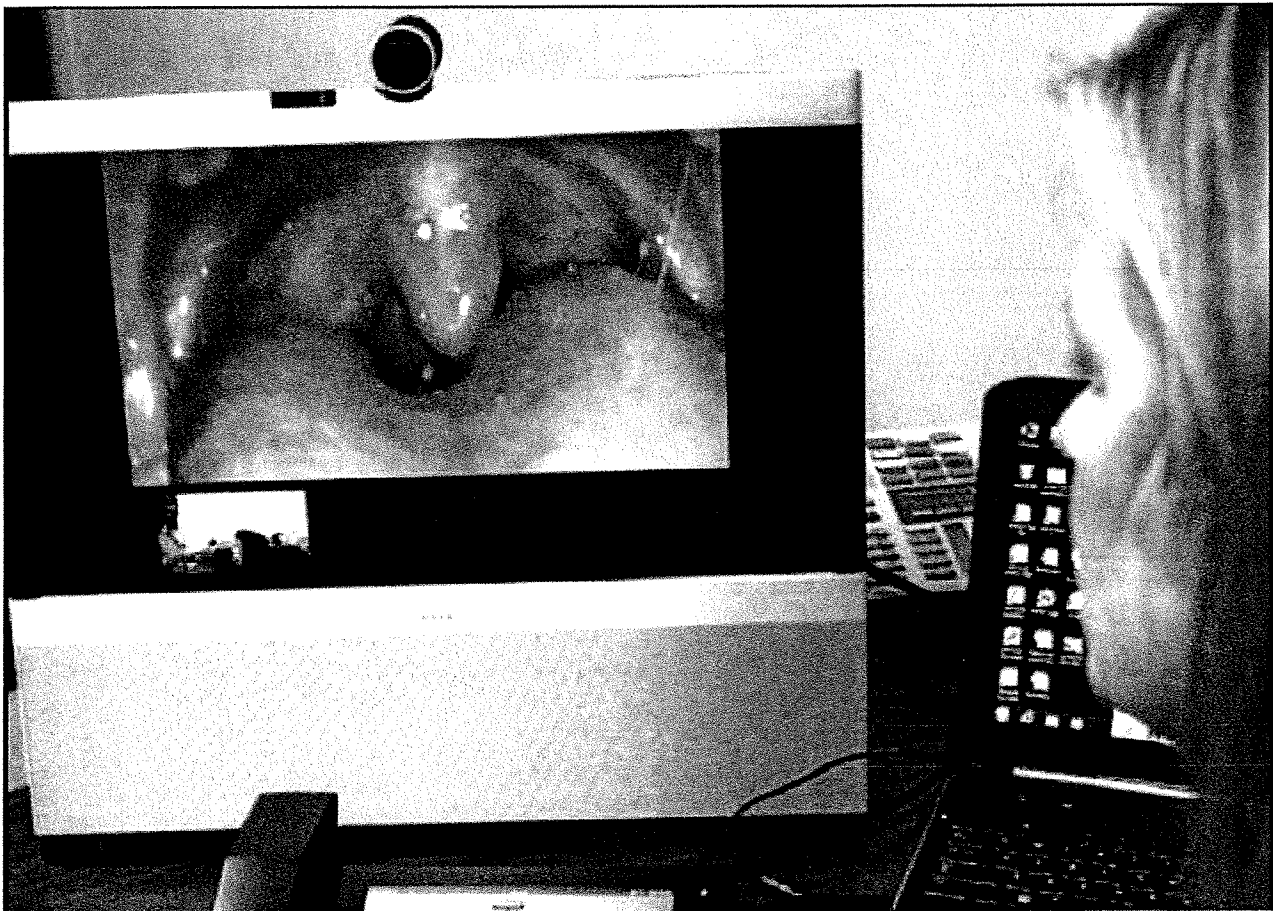
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# Telemedicine connects medical, mental health services

Imagine a doctor's ability to hear a patient's heartbeat from 10 miles away or to examine every detail of an inner ear or look down the throat of a patient in another town or city.



**In another city, a nurse practitioner actually examines the throat using this technology.**

With cutting edge technology, it is not only being imagined, it is possible, and it's starting to happen in places like Sylacauga and Childersburg. And soon it will be available in neighboring counties, like Clay and Randolph.

Through a grant of Rural Utilities Service, an agency of the US Department of Agriculture, this Distance Learning and Telemedicine technology is bringing patients and physicians together through a computer screen.

The grant awarded to Cheaha Regional Mental Health Center means those in its care who may not be able to visit a doctor's office can be examined, diagnosed and treated just as if they were in the same exam room with a physician.

Through a partnership between medical and mental health providers, technology has been set up at Childersburg Primary Care and CRMHC that allows a doctor or nurse practitioner in Childersburg to see

a patient in Sylacauga without either leaving their location.

The process uses a computer and camera on both ends over a secure network where doctor and patient can see and talk to one another.

A nurse holds a fiber optic stethoscope to the patient's chest on the Sylacauga end, and the nurse practitioner in Childersburg with her own fiber optic stethoscope listens to the heartbeat. In another instance, an otoscope is placed in the patient's ear, and the health care provider on the other end can see the most minute detail inside the ear.

"Many individuals find it difficult to travel to clinics or doctors' offices for any number of reasons," said Cindy Atkinson, executive director of CRMHC. "Telemedicine can be a great option for those with unique challenges or in situations making it difficult to receive care."

For CRMHC, it is becoming a viable alternative. "It's amazing," Atkinson said. "I think remote technology will become an increasingly popular and cost effective way to administer preventive care, manage chronic conditions and access specialized services. The grant has enabled us to put equipment in Childersburg Primary Care and the Sylacauga Outpatient Clinic, CRMHC offices in Roanoke and Lineville and at Hill Crest, a private psychiatric hospital in Birmingham" to provide comprehensive medical and mental health care.

Atkinson and Mike Bice at Childersburg Primary Care initially began exploring how to increase access to psychiatric services, focusing on the outlying areas of CRMHC's service area in Clay and Randolph counties. There is a chronic shortage of psychiatric services, particularly in rural areas, and it is difficult for many individuals to make a trip to a psychiatrist in another county.

The partnership between Atkinson and Bice eventually evolved into working with the Alabama Partnership for Telehealth with a goal of increasing and supporting the primary care needs of individuals served by CRMHC.

Communicating and examining via this technology is "nearly the same as coming to the clinic to deal with a cold, the flu or sniffles," Bice said. If the physician sees something he questions, it is always an option to see the patient face- to- face. "There is no shortcutting of care." It is not meant to replace in- person primary care; it is simply providing other options when needed.

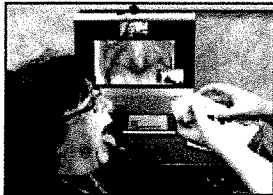
"Mental health is part of overall health. You can't separate them," Atkinson said. "Having primary care professionals to work with is so important."

Prior to the telemedicine program, a psychiatrist was scheduled one time a month in Randolph and Clay counties. With this new technology, a psychiatrist at Hill Crest provides a telepsychiatry clinic one afternoon each week in Clay or Randolph counties.

It is enabling CRMHC to enhance its mental health services while expanding its connection to medical services.

"The right care at the right time is so important," Atkinson said. "Essential to this is addressing the complete health needs of the individual." About Cheaha Regional Mental Health Center:

CRMHC provides a continuum of services for persons with intellectual disabilities, serious mental illness and substance abuse. It is dedicated to improving lives through high quality, accessible mental health services and to promoting awareness of mental health issues in the community.



For more information or to access services, contact one of the following locations: Sylacauga, 256- 245- 2201; Talladega, 256- 362- 8600; Lineville, 256- 396- 2150; Roanoke, 334- 863- 2518.

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