

COLORADO STORIES

Telehealth in Action

Brad Cochennet began having stroke symptoms during a late-summer conference in Vail in 2011. He went to Vail Medical Center, where doctors put him in front of a piece of equipment he already knew well.

Just two weeks earlier, Cochennet, CEO of Pagosa Springs Medical Center, had played host to doctors from HealthONE's CO-DOC telemedicine program, who wanted to install a telemedicine system at his hospital. Through a virtual audio and visual connection, doctors at Denver's Swedish Medical Center can quickly diagnose strokes in patients all across Colorado. The telemedicine system uses cloud-based software and a secure internet connection to allow a Denver-based neurosurgeon to look at the patient's CT scans.

On that September day in 2011, Cochennet found himself looking at CO-DOC's telemedicine system in Vail. A doctor at Swedish diagnosed his stroke, and Cochennet recovered.

Not surprisingly, he's enthusiastic about the CO-DOC system's success at Pagosa Springs Medical Center. He estimates it has saved nearly 20 people the expense (and family inconvenience) of a helicopter evacuation to Denver for a stroke

diagnosis. Another four or five times, Pagosa staff have administered the clot-busting drug alteplase, or t-PA, under the supervision of a neurologist at Swedish. Pagosa does not have a neurologist on staff full-time, and t-PA has to be given quickly to work well.

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Brad Cochennet, telehealth patient and CEO of Pagosa Springs Medical Center



Photo by HealthONE

Dr. Jeff Wagner, a neurologist, assesses a patient through the CO-DOC interface.

Although some patients find telehealth to be helpful, many people are still apprehensive about using it, especially for first-time visits. Just over half (56 percent) of U.S. adults surveyed in 2012 were willing to use video conferencing for a sick visit. However, patients seem to prefer telehealth for follow-up care, with 67 percent willing to video conference for follow-up visits.¹⁰

The age of the patient can play a role. Telehealth may meet the expectations of "digital natives" – mostly younger consumers who have been brought up with computers, tablets and smart phones. They may be more amenable to using telemedicine than older "digital immigrants" who were introduced to technology later in life.



Photo by Joe Hanel/CHI

Dorothy Tighe checks her blood pressure during a telehealth checkup at The Gardens at St. Elizabeth in Denver.

But don't tell that to Dorothy Tighe. The morning of her 78th birthday, she spent a few minutes at her weekly appointment with a telehealth terminal at The Gardens at St. Elizabeth, a Centura Health senior community in Denver's Highlands neighborhood.

About 60 residents of The Gardens at St. Elizabeth participate in the telehealth program. They visit a fourth-floor room with a view south toward downtown Denver and a line of touch-screen monitors set up on a table. After logging in with her personal identification number, the computer asks Tighe how she feels. She answered "good," but if she had chosen one of the other answers, the computer would have followed up with a series of prompting questions to zero in on the problem.

"This program has been really wonderful," Tighe said. "I think it's really saved a lot of people."

Including her.

During her first visit, she wasn't feeling good, but not

so bad that she would have gone to see the doctor. But her answers to the questions on the telehealth terminal, plus her blood pressure reading, prompted intervention from the on-site nurse, who thought she might be having a heart attack. It turned out to be a stomach ailment, but without the telehealth red flag, she thinks she would have let the problem fester.

"For me, it was really a godsend. Somebody else besides yourself is saying, 'Do something,'" Tighe said.

That was more than a year ago. Now, Tighe looks forward to the visits as confirmation that her blood pressure is under control and that her regimen of walks around the track across the street at North High School is keeping her in good health.

Karen Wold, the on-site nurse at the telehealth clinic, makes the rounds to several other Centura telehealth sites, keeping tabs on 124 patients. She estimates Centura's program saves an average of four emergency

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