



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

TELUS®
the future is friendly™

northern health

PROVINCIAL
Health Services
AUTHORITY
Province-wide solutions. Better health.

Interior Health

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2006HEALTH0021-000443
April 18, 2006

Ministry of Health

TELETHORACIC EXPANSION IMPROVES ACCESS TO SURGEONS

KELOWNA – Patients with chest diseases are receiving better and faster care regardless of where they live with the expansion of telethoracic services in rural and remote parts of northern British Columbia, announced Health Minister George Abbott.

Speaking at a demonstration of the technology that now connects thoracic surgeons at a specialist centre in Kelowna to patients in Prince George, Abbott said the video-conferencing technology from TELUS allows these thoracic surgeons to assess patients without the inconvenience and expense of extensive travel by patients and doctors.

“Telethoracic consultations have saved patients days of travel and related expenses as they can have their first consultation and follow-up visit with their thoracic surgeon in their own community instead of travelling to Kelowna,” Abbott said. “Expansion of telehealth videoconferencing technology to more than 66 communities in B.C. compared to 11 in 2001 is part of this government’s commitment to improve rural and remote residents’ access to health services and specialists.”

Thoracic surgeons treat diseases of the chest, including coronary artery disease; cancers of the lung, oesophagus, and chest wall; abnormalities of the heart valves; tumours in the organs contained in the chest cavity; and transplantation of the heart and lungs. Currently, there are 10 contracted thoracic surgeons practicing in four centres of excellence in British Columbia.

Telehealth was first applied to thoracic surgery in B.C. in October 2003, when Interior Health used the technology to enable three surgeons working in Kelowna to consult with patients across the B.C. Interior. Since then, the program has grown and now involves bi-weekly teleconferenced thoracic surgery clinics in Cranbrook, Nelson, Trail, Williams Lake, weekly clinics in Kamloops and occasional clinics in Grand Forks. Future plans will see the program expand to Terrace, Dawson Creek, Fort St John and Whitehorse in the Yukon. To date, 872 patient assessments have been made during 115 telehealth clinics.

The program allows patients greater access to specialist doctors. The BC Thoracic Surgery Program previously sent Dr. Michael Humer from Kelowna to Prince George every month. The expansion of telethoracic services means Dr. Humer can now see patients in the north on a bi-weekly basis. The average cost saving is estimated at \$750 for each patient with savings for the Interior Health as telehealth maximizes the resources of the local communities.

“Telehealth is better for the patient because the further a patient lives from a consultant, the less likely they are to use their service. By bringing the consultant to the patient electronically, patient care is improved,” said Dr. Humer. “The expanded telehealth program will save patients and surgeons even more days of travel and additional thousands of dollars.”

-more-

The system involves a nurse at the remote location who runs the clinic and aids in performing hands-on examinations. The surgeon in Kelowna uses two television monitors that show the patient and his own image so he knows what the doctor is seeing. A special lens in the remote location can also show close-up shots if necessary. Two-way audio allows the patient, the surgeon and the telehealth nurse to communicate.

The technology that allows British Columbia's six health authorities to work together is called a Private Gateway Network, and uses TELUS technology. The dedicated high-bandwidth Internet protocol network gives health authorities the necessary security, bandwidth, and speed for real-time teleconferencing.

"The expansion of the telethoracic service across two health authorities is just one example of how emerging technology can help deliver better care for British Columbians," said Barry Rivelis, vice-president of TELUS Business Solutions. "It also helps realize the vision behind investing in connecting B.C. communities to high-speed Internet."

On April 7 last year, the Province and TELUS announced the Network BC project, which will see TELUS invest \$110 million to connect 119 rural communities to broadband Internet. By connecting the remainder of the 366 communities identified by the Premier's Technology Council – such as Clinton in the Cariboo, Bella Coola on the North Coast and Zeballos in North Island – TELUS and the B.C. government will bridge the digital divide by the end of 2006.

A 2005 report from the Premier's Technology Council (PTC) devoted considerable attention to health care and placed a strong emphasis on provincial government and private sector cooperation.

2 backgrounder(s) attached.

Media contact: Marisa Adair
Public Affairs Bureau
Ministry of Health
250 952-1887
250 952-8500

Shawn Hall
TELUS External Communications
604 697-8176

For more information on government services or to subscribe to the Province's news feeds using RSS, visit the Province's website at www.gov.bc.ca.