

Telemedicine program links suburban hospitals

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From Abington Memorial Hospital, Dr. Qaisar Shah demonstrates a remote examination with Allison DeFelice, a Phoenixville Hospital patient-care attendant.



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The region's latest telemedicine partnership kicked off this week with a twist: Both hospitals involved in the alliance are in the suburbs.

Such local initiatives that use video technology to link specialists with community hospitals typically involve one of Philadelphia's large academic medical centers.

In this instance, 125-bed **Phoenixville Hospital** is working the Neurosciences Institute at **Abington Memorial Hospital** — a tertiary-care medical center in Montgomery County— to allow for remote consultations regarding the care of stroke patients.

“The beauty of telemedicine services is that it brings off-site specialty services directly to the patients and physicians who need them at exactly the time when they need them,” said [Steve Tullman](#), CEO of Phoenixville Hospital.

For stroke patients, a quick diagnosis is essential as the best outcomes occur when the clot-busting drug tPA is administered within three hours.

“Time is brain,” said Dr. [Lee Harris](#), a neurologist at Abington Memorial.

Harris said the alliance with Phoenixville is the hospital's first telemedicine partnership, but it is in discussions to bring the same program to other hospitals. Two such partnerships are expected to be finalized shortly.

The alliance is the latest in a growing number of telemedicine initiatives area hospitals have embarked on to improve patient care by creating video links with specialists.

Some examples:

n Last week, **Kennedy Health System** opened a \$5.7 million intervention neurosurgery suite, created in a partnership with the Jefferson Neurosciences Network, at its Washington Township hospital in Gloucester County. The suite includes telemedicine video integration equipment that will provide Kennedy doctors with direct contact to the Jefferson neurology team on call. Other members of the Jefferson Neurosciences Network, started in 2010 in part to provide telemedicine consulting, include **Chestnut Hill Hospital**, **Doylestown Hospital** and Underwood-Memorial Hospital in Woodbury, N.J.

n Last month, Einstein Medical Center Elkins Park installed an advanced critical-care telemedicine program through a partnership with Advanced ICU Care, an independent provider of tele-ICU services in St. Louis.

n Virtua's new \$463 million Voorhees Hospital, which opened in May, has cameras in the ceilings to provide for the potential greater use of telemedicine.

n Last year, Center City-based Wills Eye Institute began using a 39-foot-long mobile diagnostic unit equipped to bring the latest advances in ophthalmology directly to individual communities.

The bus is outfitted with the latest generation of high-tech diagnostic equipment and telemedicine capabilities that are used to examine patients and transmit test results to ophthalmologists at Wills Eye Institute.

Dr. [Qaisar Shah](#), director of neurointerventional and neurocritical care at Abington Memorial's Neurosciences Institute, noted the number of interventional neurologists is limited and not all hospitals can provide the same advanced level of care to stroke patients.

[Sarah Strzelecki](#), chief nursing officer at Phoenixville, said the hospital spent about a year talking with potential telemedicine partners for its stroke program and had discussions with four health systems. Abington was picked in part, she said, because physicians at Phoenixville already had a "strong" relationship with one of the interventional neurologists at Abington Memorial, creating a comfort level.

[Sandy Crabtree](#), clinical nurse manager at Phoenixville, said Abington Memorial is also providing education opportunities related to neurology for nurses, doctors and emergency medical-service providers at Phoenixville.

The telemedicine systems work as follows: When a suspected stroke patient arrives at Phoenixville, the hospital will notify the Neuroscience Institute at Abington Memorial. Doctors at Phoenixville will conduct an initial evaluation and administer the appropriate lab tests and imaging studies such as a CT Scan. Those test results will be sent electronically to the Abington Memorial neurologist taking the call, who will also be able to see the patient through a laptop computer that is linked to the mobile telemedicine unit (a video monitor with camera) at Phoenixville. Abington Memorial invested about \$230,000 for all the equipment.

Strzelecki said that while the equipment is expected to be used most often in the emergency department — where the hospital sees one stroke patient per month on average — the technology is portable, which will allow it to be moved elsewhere within the medical center for other patients who develop stroke symptoms.

Dr. [Andrea Hanaway](#), an ER physician at Phoenixville, said the video images transmitted to Abington Memorial are so clear the neurologist there can conduct a physical exam on a patient at Phoenixville. "They can ask a patient to hold out his tongue or move his eyebrows and conduct an exam in incredible detail," Hanaway said.

Shah noted visual examination of stroke patients is crucial to determining a treatment strategy. "It's not like in cardiology where the doctor can look at the squiggly lines on an EKG [to make a diagnosis]," he said.

Harris said the Abington neurologists will need to rely on the Phoenixville staff for tests such as the patients' reaction to touching or poking. "But we can ask them to raise arms and hold them up or looking right or left," he said.

Shah said the Abington neurologists will determine whether the patient symptoms require the administration of intravenous clot-busting drugs. The neurologist will also determine whether the patient should be transferred to Abington Memorial to receive specialized services, such as intra-arterial rtPA (which delivers clot-busting medications directly to the brain a catheter) or advanced interventional or surgical procedures not available at Phoenixville.

Hanaway said not all stroke patients will need to be transferred from Phoenixville.

Phoenixville Hospital spokeswoman [Lori Cunningham](#) said the medical center has developed a packet of information about Abington Memorial for patients, and their families, who do need to be transferred.