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News

Community Health Center launches new video conferencing technology

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By JIM SALEMI
Press Staff

MIDDLETOWN — Community Health Center unveiled a new tool Friday that will allow it to lend the expertise of CHC HIV specialist to other CHC clinics that do not have such specialists.

Called Project ECHO Hepatitis C/HIV, is a state of the art video conferencing system that allows for multiple clinics in the CHC system to link together to share expertise and information to treat HIV and Hepatitis C patients.

The purpose of the project, according to Eliza Cole, spokeswoman for CHC, is to provide specialist support and education to help primary care teams manage cases that would otherwise be referred out to specialists.

"This system will allow us to offer specialized treatment to patients across the state, many of whom do not have access to such treatment otherwise. In many communities there are few specialists willing to accept patients without insurance or with Medicaid insurance," Dr. Marwan Haddad, Medical Director of HIV, HCV, and Buprenorphine Services for CHC.

The system was developed by the University of Mexico originally to allow for treatment of Hepatitis C and HIV in rural areas via video-conference with a specialists. With the new video conferencing technology, CHC will be able to extend treatment to six clinics in the CHC system that do not have HIV care specialists. Those clinics include Bristol, Norwalk, Waterbury, Enfield, Clinton, and New London.

CHC offers HIV and Hepatitis C treatment at its New Britain, Meriden, and Middletown clinics.

Five of those clinics without a HIV hepatitis C specialist were linked up with a five member panel of medical, behavioral and pharmaceutical experts in Middletown in a conference room at the organization's offices on Main Street.

A large panel, flat screen monitor hung on the wall with its screen divided into six parts. A large camera on a table under the monitor was aimed at the table where the CHC staff were seated. A microphone was at the center of the table. The staff looked at patient information on their laptops as they asked questions of health care experts at CHC locations in Waterbury, New London Clinton, Norwalk and Bristol and offered advice or asked for additional information about the patient's history, medications, psychiatric conditions, if any, and their medication regimens.

For some of the cases, financial counseling and keeping the patient on their regimens and scheduled visits seemed to be discussed as much as medical conditions.

"Some patients have a hard time following up because of costs and transportation issues," Haddad told a physician in New London via the ECHO system while discussing a patient who skipped follow up visits.

"We need to try and correct that. The first barrier to treatment is cost or lack of insurance and transportation issues," he told his colleague.

The program will eventually allow CHC to expand access to care for other conditions, such as diabetes, asthma and chronic pain management, Cole said.

The CHC Project ECHO Hepatitis C/HIV program is funded in part by a grant from The Mayday Fund and Vertex Pharmaceuticals Inc., in support of the 'Hep-C Circle of Care' program.

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