Telemedicine May Be the Future of Hepatitis C Care

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New teleclinics linking regular health care providers with liver specialists on the Web may be the future of hepatitis C virus (HCV) care in the United States, according to a new bill introduced into Congress, which hopes to implement a new video clinic platform to help expand treatment access and expert care across the country, The Idaho Statesman reports.

The University of New Mexico launched the high-tech program, called Project ECHO (Extension for Community Health Outcomes), in 2003. It uses interactive videoconferences to connect primary care doctors in rural and underserved areas with medical specialists to help treat a variety of health conditions. Originally launched as a hepatitis C teleclinic only, the program now operates tech hubs for nearly 30 health issues across 22 U.S. states and six countries.

The program is different from other popular telemedicine platforms out there today, which mostly link patients to doctors online. With ECHO, it's doctors who are mentored by specialists on a variety of different topics, including hepatitis C treatment, gastrointestinal and liver care, mental illness, pregnancy care, genetic counseling and trauma. The program includes weekly video clinics and allows doctors to tune in when they have a particular case or issue they're having trouble with.

Under this digital supervision, even general health care providers are able to treat complicated issues without having to issue a referral. What's more, because some insurance companies and state Medicaid programs require that patients with hepatitis C be treated by a specialist, Project ECHO is able to help get HCV patients approved for lifesaving cures without requiring them to visit (or pay for) separate doctors.

The program has been such a success that in April, Sens. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) introduced the ECHO Act, which would require federal health care centers across the country to analyze the telemedicine model and figure out how to adopt and fund the program in their facilities. The bill has since been passed to a congressional committee for review.

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