

Alzheimer's care offered via UMMC's telehealth program

A desire for equal access to health care, combined with a shortage of physicians in rural areas, helped spawn the creation of telehealth – or virtual health care – in Mississippi.

Now one of the nation's leaders in providing health assessments via computer, the University of Mississippi Medical Center is branching out to offer patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia another form of access to medical specialists.

The new program, TeleMIND, is being implemented in stages around the state, said Dr. Kristi Henderson, UMMC's chief telehealth and innovation officer. "There's a strategic plan around where we locate based on need as well as partners that want this new service in their community," she said. "We've started in Grenada and Lexington and then have locations in the Mississippi Delta in the next phase of implementation."

Dr. Tom Mosley, professor of clinical geriatrics and gerontology and executive director of UMMC's The MIND Center, which delivers the TeleMIND service, said the program is "piggy-backing" off the already fantastic success coming from Henderson's work with telehealth in Mississippi.

"We are using her system to start offering some of these services for evaluation for older adults with memory loss in some of these places where they'd basically have to drive all the way to Jackson from the Delta," said Mosley.

TeleMIND, much like previously implemented telehealth programs, allows patients to visit a clinic in their vicinity so that they can be examined via live audio and video by a UMMC physician in Jackson. At the remote location, the patient will be in the room with a health-care professional trained to help facilitate the virtual exam.

"Because we have the only geriatricians specially trained in Alzheimer's and dementia, some of the most complicated and vulnerable patients around our state are having to travel long distances to see them," said Henderson. "That's very disorienting and stressful for the patient, and often results in missed appointments because it's such a challenge."

Beth Adcock, a nurse at UMMC's Holmes County Hospital and Clinics in Lexington, already has facilitated TeleMIND appointments with patients at her location with physicians back in Jackson.

"It didn't feel like a doctor's visit. It felt like an open, flowing conversation," said Adcock of the patients' response to virtually meeting with their physicians. "They really liked the fact that they didn't have to leave the county and drive to Jackson for the appointment."

Adcock admitted she was at first surprised with how easily the appointments went. Now, she sees TeleMIND as the "wave of the future," one that will bring more health-care services to

smaller areas like Holmes County, where residents previously had to leave to seek more specialty care.

“A lot of our patients have to set up rides to go to the doctor, even if it’s just five miles away from here,” said Adcock. “The drive to Jackson was an even bigger burden.”

While telehealth can alleviate long commutes and offer access to the more rural communities, it also doesn’t mean the end to health care as we know it, said Henderson.

“It doesn't replace in-person care, but it definitely does minimize the need frequency of in-person care,” she said. “It allows us to limit that to when we absolutely need it for diagnostic tests, surgery or X-rays, things that we can't do over telemedicine.”

However, what telehealth does allow is many exams that are usually conducted in person to be administered via audio and visual streaming. That also includes a neurological exam, the type needed to assess the status of a patient with Alzheimer’s, said Henderson.

“I think it's a unique program, an important program,” said Mosley. “It’s the kind of thing where, if the Medical Center doesn't do it, no one else will do it.

“I think we are unique in terms of being one of the first states that's trying to deliver these types of services through this network,” he added.