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Raising the bar for treating those behind bars

Virginia is using cutting-edge "telemedicine" to allow doctors to look at patients from miles away.

BY DANIEL TAYLOR
BRISTOL HERALD-COURIER

ABINGDON — Psychiatrist Antony Joseph looked carefully over an inmate at the Southwest Virginia Regional Jail, trying to determine if the medicine he recently prescribed was working.

It was a standard mental health checkup for the patient except Joseph was in Richmond.

The patient, who was taking medicine for schizophrenia, spoke with Joseph from a small room at the jail using a video-conferencing system known as telemedicine.

Using the system, Joseph can check on a patient from hundreds of miles away. He also can operate a small camera mounted on the television monitor and zoom in on a patient to look for signs that tell whether a prescribed medication is working.

After a 10-minute session with the inmate, Joseph said his health appeared to be improving.

"He said he was sleeping better," Joseph said. "He said he was tolerating the medication, and I determined it was working."

Every Thursday, Joseph sees about 20 patients at jails in Abingdon and Haysi without ever leav-

ing his Richmond office.

The jails have been equipped for telemedicine for less than two months, and are the first in Virginia to use the system.

It's especially useful in remote areas, said Dr. Kaveth Ofogh, chief physician of the Southwest Virginia Regional Jail Authority, which runs the Abingdon and Haysi jails as well as two others in the region.

Ofogh said having the system allows him to pick and choose from the best psychiatrists, no matter where they are. Time is a factor in expanding the search beyond Southwest Virginia since scheduling an appointment with a psychiatrist from the region could take months.

With telemedicine, inmates

can see a doctor every week.

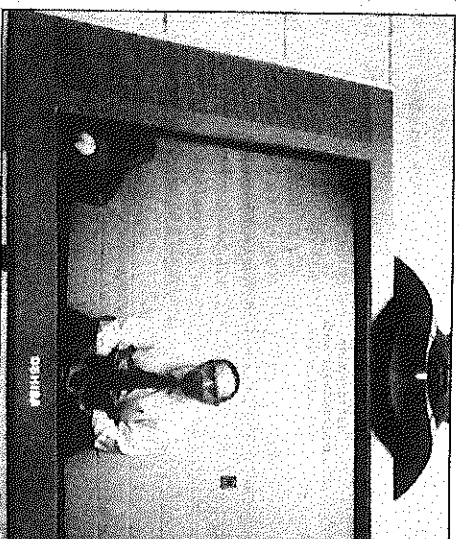
"We can reduce the cost of patient transportation, there's less waiting time and we can improve the quality of the care," he said.

While doctors "can't do brain surgery," the system doesn't handicap physicians at all, Ofogh said.

Nor is the system restricted to psychiatry. If the jail ever needed to, it could look to Richmond for doctors in other medical fields, Ofogh said.

The jail paid about \$10,000 each for the machines and it costs 60 to 80 cents per minute to operate them, but they more than pay for themselves, Ofogh said.

"It's not a toy for science fiction anymore," he said.



Dr. Kaveth Ofogh is seen on a television display in Abingdon demonstrating how inmates in the Southwest Virginia Regional Jail are able to see a psychiatrist in Richmond, through the use of a video-conferencing system known as telemedicine. AP PHOTO