

MSU doctors bring much-needed psychiatric care to rural areas via technology

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To tackle the growing number of psychiatric cases in Michigan's rural areas, particularly among children and adolescents, a team of Michigan State University doctors from the colleges of Osteopathic Medicine and Human Medicine meet each week with patients from across the state via video conference.

On a typical morning, doctors in MSU's Department of Psychiatry may see up to 10 patients each from as far away as Cadillac or Marquette – all without leaving the office. Patients, instead of traveling for hours to a clinic, can visit their respective county's community mental health center. From there, they are connected with a psychiatrist using a secure video connection.

"We are able to provide services to populations in a way that is timely and just as effective," said Jed Magen, Department of Psychiatry chairperson. "It comes down to access to care, and too often, many families and children are forced to go without the vital care they need.

"Programs such as this can make a difference."

MSU began its program about three years ago and has now reached capacity, Magen said. A team of six doctors see anywhere from four to 10 patients each week, making MSU's program the leader in the state and one of the most active in the Midwest. Doctors treat psychiatric ailments from attention deficit disorders to childhood aggression to depression, and Magen said patients, particularly children and

adolescents already in tune with technology, adapt well to the set-up.

A lack of psychiatric doctors in many rural areas and the long distances families have to travel make the technology-based visits a necessity, Magen said.

"This really was in response to a shortage in psychiatrists, which is seen not only in Michigan but nationwide," he said. "The problem is especially acute in child psychiatry. This is the only viable solution."

For example, Magen said, north of the Mount Pleasant area, there are very few child psychiatrists and only one throughout the Upper Peninsula. According to the federal government's Bureau of Health Professions, 65 of Michigan's 83 counties are designated as "health professional shortage areas" in regards to mental health.

MSU doctors currently are seeing patients now from Marquette, Flint, Alma, Ludington, Cadillac; programs are slated for Escanaba and the Thumb region. MSU psychiatrist Paul Quinlan connects four days a week with patients from Marquette and two days a week with patients from Flint.

"We do take a slightly different approach to establishing rapport," Quinlan said, "but we're finding patients respond well and are very comfortable. It provides comfort to children and families to know someone is accessible to help them."

In addition to the lack of doctors in psychiatric care, Magen added, the down economy contributes to growth in the need for services.

"The general opinion is that psychiatric disorders tend to be more problematic, and individuals need treatment more often in financially hard times," he said.

Source: Michigan State University

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