

Satellite technology beams expertise to remote Alaska clinic

September 22 2016, by Rachel D'oro



In this photo taken Sept. 13, 2016, critical care doctor Shadi Battah, left, in Anchorage, Alaska, converses with emergency medical technician Dmitri Dela Cruz at the Iliuliuk Family and Health Services on Unalaska Island during a demonstration of a new telemedicine partnership with Providence Alaska Medical Center. Beginning Thursday, Sept. 22, the Anchorage hospital will virtually beam critical care doctors 800 miles away to the emergency room of the clinic to assist staffers there during medical emergencies, thanks to a satellite link instead of the usual fiber optics. (AP Photo/Rachel D'Oro)

The only clinic in one of the nation's busiest commercial fishing ports is so remote that even conventional telemedicine for emergencies has been impossible for its limited staff—until this week.

Starting Thursday, a new partnership with an Anchorage hospital will virtually beam critical care doctors 800 miles (1,287 kilometers) away to the emergency room on the island that holds Dutch Harbor, the operations base for the Bering Sea crabbing fleet made famous by the Discovery Channel show "Deadliest Catch."

But instead of transmissions with fiber-optics, which are nowhere near isolated Unalaska Island, the team putting together the system is relying on satellite technology in what is believed to be a first in the country for telemedicine. The new connection is expected to boost outpatient care as needed by clinic staffers, including its two non-emergency doctors.

The clinic, Iliuliuk Family and Health Services, brings to nine the number of providers served by the electronic intensive care unit at Anchorage's Providence Alaska Medical Center.

"We are kind of mix-mashing everything together to try to make this work," Sharon Compton, services manager of Providence's eICU office, said after a recent demonstration of the Dutch Harbor link.



In this photo taken Sept. 13, 2016, critical care doctor Shadi Battah in Anchorage, Alaska, converses with clinicians at the Iliuliuk Family and Health Services on Unalaska Island during a demonstration of a new telemedicine partnership with Providence Alaska Medical Center. Beginning Thursday, Sept. 22, the Anchorage hospital will virtually beam critical care doctors 800 miles away to the emergency room of the clinic to assist staffers there during medical emergencies, thanks to a satellite link instead of the usual fiber optics. (AP Photo/Rachel D'Oro)

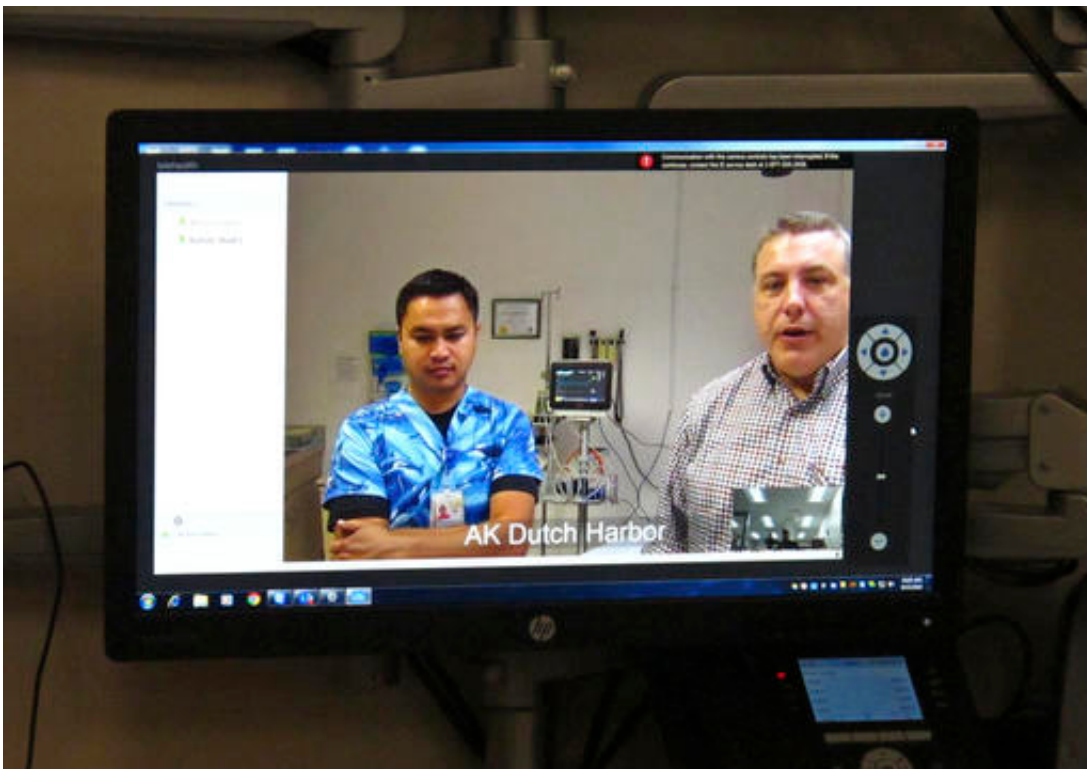
The new system will provide real-time camera links between emergency doctors and clinic staffers during medical emergencies, such as fishing industry injuries.

The idea is to help stabilize patients before transporting them out of town and to help with triage during major events like a ship sinking.

From afar, doctors will be able to view X-rays and patient charts and talk directly with patients on camera instead of consulting with medics by phone and email.

There are some unknowns about how the system will work, with likely slowdowns in satellite reception because of the region's notoriously bad weather.

During the recent demonstration, pre-launch kinks prevented the rolling-cart-mounted camera in Dutch Harbor from being pivoted remotely. But the camera otherwise performed impressively, sending back crystal-clear video of clinic staffers as they chatted with a critical care doctor.



In this photo taken Sept. 13, 2016, in Anchorage, Alaska, emergency medical technician Dmitri Dela Cruz, left, and nurse practitioner James Novotny are seen on a screen at the Iliuliuk Family and Health Services on Unalaska Island during a demonstration of a new telemedicine partnership with Providence Alaska

Medical Center. Beginning Thursday, Sept. 22, the Anchorage hospital will virtually beam critical care doctors 800 miles away to the emergency room of the clinic to assist staffers there during medical emergencies, thanks to a satellite link instead of the usual fiber optics. (AP Photo/Rachel D'Oro)

The new service was lauded by Seattle-based crabbing boat owner Lance Farr, who has been badly hurt twice in his decades of working in the Bering Sea.

Several years ago, he almost severed a finger in a dockside engine accident. He was stabilized at the clinic before being flown to Anchorage for further treatment. In 1996, Farr broke his foot at Dutch Harbor after dropping an engine on it. He spent the night at the clinic under the care of nurses before being flown out the next day.

In hindsight, having his care visually monitored by emergency room specialists would have provided a morale boost, as well as invaluable expertise, Farr said.

"It would be a good thing, I would think, to have a real physician being able to advise the people out there," he said.

The city of Unalaska has just 4,600 year-round residents, but the population swells to 16,000 or more during the region's two main fishing seasons, when boat crews and processing workers flood the town with dozens of languages and cultures. That means more potential for patients, including people who don't speak English.



In this photo taken Sept. 13, 2016, eICU office services manager Sharon Compton in Anchorage, Alaska, talks about a new telemedicine partnership between the Iliuliuk Family and Health Services on Unalaska Island and Providence Alaska Medical Center. Beginning Thursday, Sept. 22, the Anchorage hospital will virtually beam critical care doctors 800 miles away to the emergency room of the clinic to assist staffers there during medical emergencies, thanks to a satellite link instead of the usual fiber optics. (AP Photo/Rachel D'Oro)

The clinic averages more than 300 after-hours emergency room visits a year, with about a third of those patients flown elsewhere, often to Anchorage, for more complete treatment.

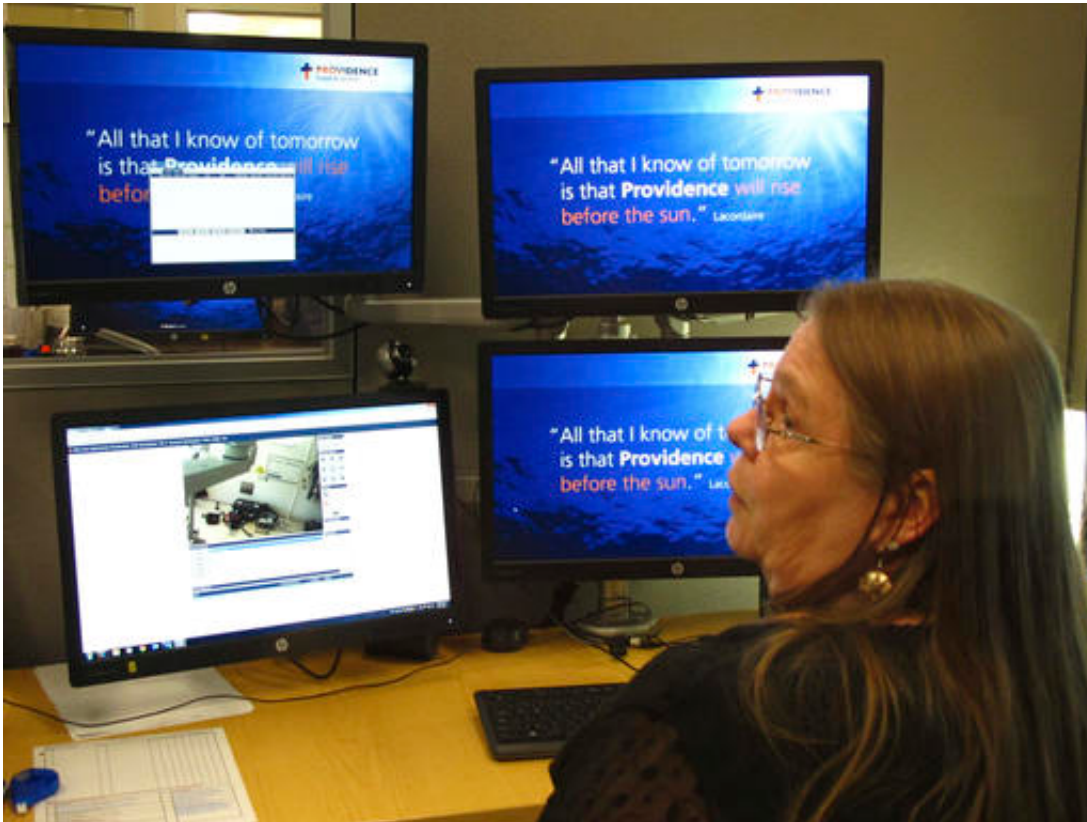
Fishing-industry emergencies at sea can mean significant delays to appropriate medical treatments when the injured must first be carried by

rescue helicopter to Dutch Harbor. Injuries can range from deep cuts and broken bones to back injuries and amputations.

"These guys are pretty tough out here, and they will, you know, continue to fish until they can't get out of bed anymore," said James Novotny, nurse practitioner at the clinic.

The drastically shifting population can put a strain on clinic staffing in this rural setting. So can the inability to afford emergency specialists or much in the way of diagnostic equipment.

Then there's the challenge of living in such a far-flung spot, which makes finding and keeping medical staff difficult, according to clinic medical director, Ann Nora Ehret, an osteopathic doctor who has wanted to tap into telemedicine since joining the staff in 2013. Only recently did the clinic hire a second doctor after the position was vacant for more than five years.



In this photo taken Sept. 13, 2016, intensive care unit nurse Deborah Springer in Anchorage, Alaska, demonstrates the focusing ability of a telemedicine camera that is part of a new telemedicine partnership between the Iliuliuk Family and Health Services on Unalaska Island and Providence Alaska Medical Center. Beginning Thursday, Sept. 22, the Anchorage hospital will virtually beam critical care doctors 800 miles away to the emergency room of the clinic to assist staffers there during medical emergencies, thanks to a satellite link instead of the usual fiber optics. (AP Photo/Rachel D'Oro)

Adding the long-distance help will be invaluable, Ehret said.

"I think it could be a game changer for recruiting, retention and for the care of the patients," she said. "We are getting the support we need in an austere environment."

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