

UHN ESTABLISHES FIRST TELEPATHOLOGY SYSTEM IN ONTARIO

New System Connects UHN Pathologists to Northern Ontario communities over the Internet

July 21, 2010 (Toronto, ON) - Physicians in three Northern Ontario communities are now virtually linked at all times to pathology specialists at University Health Network (UHN), thanks to a revolutionary new way of diagnosing pathology cases over the Internet.

The new telepathology system is the first of its kind in Ontario. It allows physicians in rural and remote hospitals to access and consult with specialized UHN pathologists by instantly transmitting digital images of pathology samples enabling fast and accurate diagnosis for patients regardless of where they live. The first three sites connected to UHN are community hospitals in Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie and Kapuskasing all of which are over 600 kilometres from Toronto.

“Community hospitals often still rely on a general, onsite pathologist to diagnose routine cases, but defer to UHN expert consultation for the more challenging cases,” explains Dr. Sylvia Asa, Medical Director, Laboratory Medicine Program and Pathologist-in-Chief at UHN. “Other community hospitals have no pathology services at all and have to ship tissue and blood samples to laboratories in other cities. We needed to find a better way to provide our services to these communities.”

Dr. Asa adds that transportation times from Ontario’s northern communities to downtown Toronto range from 24 to 48 hours, making intra-operative consultation with UHN pathologists virtually impossible. “Now, surgeons in smaller communities can send biopsies during the actual surgical procedure and we can advise them as to the proper course of treatment,” Dr. Asa says. “In the past, a patient would have a biopsy, wait for the result and then sometimes require yet another painful surgery.”

“The telepathology system will bring the capacity to provide clinical support and diagnostic capacity to our laboratory that would normally only be found in highly-specialized large city hospitals,” said Timmins and District Hospital CEO, Roger Walker. “In many cases, this will save two or three trips from a home community to our hospital because the work can be done locally and in a single visit.”

The project is supported by Canada Health Infoway (*Infoway*), the Ontario government and eHealth Ontario.

Infoway has provided \$600,000 in funding to support the development of the telepathology system. *Infoway* is an independent, not-for-profit organization funded by the federal government that jointly invests with every province and territory to accelerate the development and adoption of electronic health record projects in Canada.

“This telepathology program is a great example of the benefits electronic health record systems can deliver to patients,” said Richard Alvarez, President and CEO of Canada Health Infoway. “It improves access to important specialized pathology services and saves patients time, worry and discomfort, while leading to better health outcomes.”

“eHealth Ontario is proud to provide the network for an initiative which advances health care delivery and benefits Ontarians,” said Greg Reed, President and CEO, eHealth Ontario. “This project illustrates how collaboration and innovation within the health care system can improve patient care, safety and access.”

The origins of this system lie in similar challenges faced several years ago by the UHN pathology department around transporting slides. Having once been scattered across UHN's three sites, pathology services were consolidated at the Toronto General Hospital. This created a hub of expertise where pathologists of all subspecialties could meet and confer on some of pathology's most challenging cases. The one drawback, however, was that pathologists often had to travel to the other two hospitals to diagnose samples. The time allotted to these cases, including travel back and forth, could sometimes reach three hours, which in some cases could lead to lag in services.

In 2002, pathologist Dr. Andrew Evans began to investigate a digital system and has served as the telepathology coordinator since the program's inception in 2003. While various forms of telepathology have been used around the world since the late 1980s, Dr. Evans says that the University Health Network program is the first in the world to use cutting edge virtual slide telepathology for primary diagnosis in patient care.

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