

## County clinics to tap into high-tech medical network

By Tom Kiskan

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A new digital superhighway unveiled Tuesday will connect patients at low-cost clinics in corners of Ventura County to California's most prestigious specialists in a project touted as the future of medicine.

The California Telehealth Network will use video-conferencing and custom-built broadband connections dedicated to healthcare to give patients at hundreds of clinics in underserved areas across the state access to a wide range of specialists at University of California hospitals and other medical centers.

A handful of sites were launched Tuesday, and nine Clinicas del Camino clinics in Ventura County, from Fillmore to Newbury Park, are scheduled to join within two months in the first wave of the network.

A Ventura County Health Care Agency official confirmed plans for county clinics to also be part of the broadband network, with a goal of giving patients access to specialists, including doctors at a multiple sclerosis unit and physicians at Ventura County Medical Center.

The network, funded largely by the Federal Communications Commission, means patients who might otherwise have to navigate Interstate 405 for medical care will now go to a clinic and use T1 lines to confer with a specialist on a video monitor that looks like a flat-screen TV.

"This is huge, because our patients don't have to travel anywhere else," said Antonio Alatorre, chief operations officer at Clinicas del Camino Real, noting patients sometimes have to wait three or four months for an appointment with a specialist. "Now it's instant access through video."

The network means that rather than meeting separately with primary care doctors and specialists, patients can meet with both at once, said Dr. Bob Gonzalez, medical director for the Ventura County Health Care Agency. It reinforces the concept of a medical home where people get the care they need, including diagnoses from psychiatrists and urologists, at one clinic.

But the technology also brings challenges, like replicating the hands-on aspects of medicine. Gonzalez said patients may need to be convinced the care they get through teleconferencing is the same as visiting a specialist's office.

The network was launched by a coalition of state and government agencies, healthcare groups and technology firms. Its \$30 million-plus in funding includes \$22 million over three years from the FCC.

The network is dedicated only to healthcare and funneled through connections separate from the mind-boggling exchange of information on the Internet. It's a virtual private network, said Eric Brown, executive director of the Telehealth Network.

While "nothing is totally bulletproof," Brown said, the separation and the custom-made design helps limit the possibility of glitches that could interfere with a diagnosis. The chance of privacy breaches is also minimized, he said.

At Clinicas, costs of the long-distance specialist will be billed to insurance. Uninsured people won't be charged any extra fee for a specialist's consultation, Alatorre said

The key of the program is access, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said at a Sacramento news conference Tuesday. He was one of many who characterized the technology as the future.

"It should not be a matter of how rich you are or where you live," he said. "I think everyone should have this access."

