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- Survey Respondents
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- Special Sections & Supplements

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- Podcasts
- Photo Galleries
- Videos
- Webcasts/Webinars

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- International
- Legislation/Regulation
- Public Health
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Schwarzenegger: telehealth the 'future of medicine'

By **Joseph Conn / HITS staff writer**

Posted: August 18, 2010 - 11:45 am ET

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger officially launched the California Telehealth Network on Tuesday at the University of California-Davis Cancer Center in Sacramento.

Schwarzenegger lumped the telecommunications network's development in with construction of bridges, highways and other concrete-and-steel projects included in his administration's \$60 billion infrastructure development program, but he also pointed to the special role information technology plays in saving lives and improving public health.

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"Here, we're talking about the digital highway, broadband, that is also part of the infrastructure," Schwarzenegger said at the briefing. In attendance was U.S. Chief Technology Officer Anesh Chopra and state and local health IT officials.

"You are showing to the world how it is done. Every day in California we will be improving lives and because of it, saving lives," Schwarzenegger said.

The California Telehealth Network will give patients at healthcare clinics in rural and medically underserved areas across the state telecommunications access to specialists at state teaching hospitals. "I think telemedicine is going to be the future of medicine," Schwarzenegger said, adding that telehealth is a facet of healthcare reform in that it helps provide good-quality, affordable care for everyone.

Maria Alino, a pediatrician in solo practice in Oroville, Calif., has been using telemedicine in her practice for 10 years as part of a precursor pilot to the CTN with UC Davis. She appeared on a projection screen at the briefing, beamed there from 108-bed Oroville Hospital, located in an agricultural community about 70 miles north of Sacramento.

Alino said in a telephone interview after the conference that she uses the telehealth system at least twice a week, on average, primarily in scheduled consults with pediatric specialists in endocrinology, psychiatry, neurology and weight management, but also on occasion in emergencies. Once, she said, she helped save the life of newborn who had a defective heart by contacting a pediatric cardiologist via the telehealth system.

"The baby came out blue," Alino recalled, but Oroville Hospital was able to transmit via the network an echocardiogram and link to the UC Davis specialist on video in real time.

"(The specialist's) face was in the television," Alino said. "She was saying do this, do that; it was so nice."

Alino said Oroville was "lucky to be the first one" on the pilot network, and now, "I hope that other physicians will have the benefits that I did."

CTN Executive Director Eric Brown said plans call for activating the first 50 new sites on the network in the next few months. The goal is to have about 800 sites connected within three years.

The \$30 million CTN was funded by a \$22.1 million grant from the Federal Communications Commission, \$3.6 million from the California Emerging Technology Fund, \$2 million from the California Foundation and grants and pledges of support from UnitedHealthcare. The University of California Office of the President and the UC Davis Health System are the entities legally and financially responsible for the project.

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 Open Surveys
 Survey Respondents
 By the Numbers

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 Editorials
 Reporter's Notebook

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 LinkedIn Group
 Twitter Feed
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