

# Medical Education

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## University gets money for medical centers

MERCED SUN-STAR

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UC Merced moved one step closer to creating a series of telemedicine centers to address the health care needs of underserved residents of the San Joaquin Valley.

Chancellor Steve Kang and corporate supporters gathered in the university's California Room to announce \$1 million in funds have been provided to the school to pursue its goal of creating four telemedicine centers, also known as "eHealth Centers."

The contributions included a \$500,000 gift from AT&T, \$200,000 from the California Emerging Technology Fund and \$250,000 from the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley. "We are grateful for their tremendous support," Kang said. "This project will present unique opportunities to address the Valley's health care needs, particularly in rural, underserved areas."

Telemedicine centers use videoconferencing equipment to transmit a patient's medical information and images from clinics in relatively remote areas to doctors and specialists in cities. The centers allow doctors in two or more different areas to conduct live videoconferencing discussions about their patient's health -- even if the doctors are hundreds of miles apart.

Maria Pallavicini, dean of UC Merced's School of Natural Sciences, said more than 100 places in the valley -- from Stockton to Bakersfield and the surrounding foothills -- are being considered as possible sites for the four telemedicine centers, which could open by next September.

The new system would also help bridge the digital divide in some low-income communities by giving rural doctors the means to transmit high-definition scans and images to specialists at more technologically advanced medical institutions. "It's very important to have access to a specialist without having to travel hundreds of miles," Pallavicini said.

Establishing the telemedicine centers fits with UC Merced's ambitions to eventually establish a medical school at the campus, Pallavicini said. Kang said the business plan for the new medical school will probably be submitted to the UC Office of the President by November, before it moves on to the UC Board of Regents.

The centers are key because of the historically poor access to quality health care in the region, Pallavicini said.

The Valley has 87 practicing primary care physicians for every 100,000 residents, compared to the state average of 126 per 100,000, according to the Central Valley Health Policy Institute.

That study also found the Valley has 43 practicing specialists per every 100,000 residents, compared to

the state average of 87 specialists.

UC Merced is partnering with administrators and staff at UC Davis and UC San Francisco at Fresno to help develop the centers, especially because UC Davis was one of the first entities to establish its own telemedicine program in 1996.

UC Davis uses telemedicine at 60 sites statewide for about 30 specialties, such as dermatology, cardiology, neurosurgery, urology, infectious diseases and oncology.

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