



Dr. Charles Brasfield provides psychiatric outreach to the remote communities of Bella Bella and Bella Coola using VCH's telehealth equipment in North Vancouver.

Telehealth enables psychiatric outreach to the Bellas

Sharing your deepest secrets or recounting traumatic experiences for the first time is difficult to do. Would talking to a person on a television screen be easier than if they were sitting right in front of you? **Dr. Charles Brasfield**, a psychiatrist in North Vancouver, thinks it is sometimes better.

“We’re all trained to look at TV. Distancing conversation can make patients remarkably comfortable to talk about things they have never told anyone,” he says.

In the coastal community of Bella Bella, where about 90 percent of women are raped by the time they are 15 years old, psychiatric outreach is a needed service that they have long been without. Using telehealth—the delivery of health services using technology such as videoconferencing—Dr. Brasfield has connected with patients without the need for travel.

He got to know the community of 1,500 residents when he began monthly visits from 1992 to 2004. But no psychiatrist took his place. There was a two-year gap in service until Vancouver Coastal Health offered the use of videoconferencing equipment to provide his services by telehealth in May 2006.

Last November the service extended to Bella Coola, east of Bella Bella, offering services to 900 residents with similar success.

As it turns out, the technology has not been the challenge in providing telehealth services. “For me it’s one button and I’m connected,” says Dr. Brasfield. “In communities that often have no plane service due to weather conditions, only once since last May have I not been able to make contact using telehealth.”

“The challenge is the administrative scheduling of appointments in mobile communities,” continues Dr. Brasfield. “Appointments need to be booked around their busy lives. They fly out to go shopping, or if it’s salmon or herring season they could be gone for weeks.”

March marked an exciting telehealth milestone as a patient was scheduled for a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) session with psychologist **Dr. Michelle Haring** from the North Vancouver clinic. This is a form of psychotherapy based on modifying everyday thoughts and behaviours, with the aim of positively influencing emotions. It is universally recommended, but not often available. Drs. Haring and Brasfield believe it is the first CBT case via telehealth in British Columbia, perhaps Canada.

“I’ve been impressed by the support of the community to make this happen,” says Dr. Brasfield, explaining that it took only one hour to initially set up the service. His clinic staff and staff from R.W. Large Memorial hospital met in a videoconferencing meeting. They were able to pan the camera around the room to introduce themselves, as if they were meeting face to face.

New ideas for telehealth are also being evaluated. Dr. Brasfield may use videoconferencing to connect with three counsellors in Bella Bella who often need ideas to help their patients. Diabetic education is another possibility.

*For more information on telehealth in VCH, contact **Chris Clement**, regional manager, IMIS telehealth services, at chris.clement@vch.ca.*