Telemedicine Helps Relieve Doctor Shortage

The Texas Health Department estimates that about half of the state's counties have shortages of medical professionals. The University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston is taking another step in using telemedicine to address patient needs. As Capella Tucker reports, UTMB in Galveston started using telemedicine in 1994 to provide medical treatment to inmates in the Texas Prison System. Since then officials have been working on ways to expand the system to others, especially those in medically underserved areas.

Right now they average 3,500 telemedicine visits, 15 percent of those are outside the prison system. The latest effort has UTMB partnering with the UT Health Science Center in Houston. UTMB Community Outreach Director Doctor Ben Raimer says a new initiative uses telemedicine with students in the Houston Independent School District. Raimer says mental health services for children are limited and this provides another way for children to access services. Raimer says right now the services are free thanks to a $500,000 grant from the Cullen Trust for Health Care. The grant will also target Hispanic populations in the Rio Grand Valley.

The motivation behind telemedicine is the idea that all people should have access to a wide range of primary and specialty health care. Through telemedicine, doctors can talk to patients, do a visual exam and can even inspect x-rays, ultrasounds and lab test results. UTMB's Center for Tele-Health Director Doctor Jeanette Hartshorn says they are able to get equipment into medically underserved areas, such as the Valley, through schools and there's a mobile health van. Hartshorn says the cost of a physician visit is the same in person or with telemedicine. But she says doctors are able to see more patients with telemedicine.

Many areas, including Houston, are experiencing shortages of doctors in certain specialties. Hartshorn says medical institutions may be able to help each other. Hartshorn says they do recognize the limitations of telemedicine, for example, a patient in the Valley may need a hands-on examination the doctor sitting in Houston can't perform. Hartshorn says they also realize some patients may prefer to see a doctor in person. But she says few people turn down telemedicine once they give it a chance.