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Remote cardiac monitoring system reaches milestone

Calgary program the first in Canada to have more than 1,000 patients using device

CALGARY – A local program has become the first in Canada to equip more than 1,000 cardiac patients with a remote monitoring system for their heart rhythm devices, reducing unnecessary hospital and emergency department visits.

About 1,200 patients, mostly in southern Alberta, are now using the Medtronic Carelink system, which allows local health care providers within Alberta Health Services (AHS) to remotely monitor patients who have pacemakers, defibrillators, cardiac resynchronization and implantable heart monitors.

“Instead of coming to the clinic every three months, patients now only need to come in once a year. About a third of our patients live more than 100 kilometres from the clinic, so this technology saves hundreds of people a lot of travel time and expense,” says Dr. Derek Exner, Medical Director of the AHS Cardiac Arrhythmia Program at Foothills Medical Centre.

“Fewer visits mean more space for us to see other patients.”

In 2004, the Calgary program was the first in Canada to use Carelink, which was designed in the U.S. and is now used in most major North American centres for early recognition and prompt correction of an irregular heartbeat. A similar program is being developed in Edmonton to serve patients throughout northern Alberta.

The remote monitoring system – fully funded by AHS – uses a small bedside monitor, about the size of a clock radio, which transmits data from the heart rhythm device, over a phone line to a secure server. The device data is then reviewed by clinical staff.

Carelink can send automatic transmissions whenever a patient is within three metres of the bedside monitor, and makes automatic transmissions if a potential problem with the patient's heart rhythm or heart rhythm device is identified. Patients can also make manual transmissions if they feel something is wrong, alleviating anxiety and improving the delivery of health care.

“I've been on the other side of the world on the phone with a patient letting them know what's going on with their heart rhythm device,” Dr. Exner says. “It allows us to follow patients more closely without increasing clinical staff. It's an incredibly powerful tool.”

Bruce McRitchie depends on a defibrillator for his heart rhythm problem, or arrhythmia. He says Carelink has helped him avoid unnecessary visits to an emergency department whenever he is concerned something might be wrong.

“It's saved me many trips to the emergency ward,” the 59-year-old says. “It's nice to know I'm a phone call away from help.”

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Dr. Todd Anderson, Director of Libin Cardiovascular Institute of Alberta and Department Head of Cardiac Science, says the arrhythmia services at Libin continue to provide leading-edge care to patients throughout southern Alberta, as well as parts of southern B.C. and Saskatchewan.

“Carelink is not only more convenient for patients with implantable heart rhythm devices but has also allowed us to provide them with a superior level of care,” Dr. Anderson says. “This has helped drive the growth of this program since it started. Today AHS and Libin Cardiovascular Institute are national leaders when it comes to remote monitoring of heart rhythm patients.”

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than 3.7 million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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The Libin Cardiovascular Institute of Alberta provides superb education and training of health care professionals, world-class treatment, using state-of-the-art technology, increased access to cardiac services through innovative use of technologies such as Telehealth, research programs in cardiovascular basic science, biomedical engineering, clinical science, population health research, and the relationships among them. For over 30 years the institute has been at the forefront of heart rhythm or cardiac electrophysiology research, education and care delivery. The envelope of medical science knowledge has been expanded by responding to the gap between basic biomedical science and health care innovation by reinforcing translational science including the execution of clinical trials. For more information, visit www.LibinInstitute.org.