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WMC stroke care reaches Douglas

By ALLISON RUPP
Star-Tribune staff writer

Several times a month, Dr. David Wheeler sees stroke patients who have bad outcomes or die because they did not receive a diagnosis and appropriate treatment soon enough.

Physicians have about a three-hour window to treat someone having a stroke to have the best possible outcome, Wheeler said, and sometimes this can be difficult if the patient lives in a rural area where there are not stroke specialists.

Now, Wheeler, a neurologist, and the Wyoming Medical Center Stroke Program can treat stroke patients at Memorial Hospital of Converse County in Douglas. They plan to expand to other rural towns in the near future.

Wyoming Medical Center announced last week it has implemented a telemedicine program for stroke patients, made possible through REACH Call, a Georgia-based company specializing in telestroke technology.

"A neurologist in Casper is now able to interact with the patient and physician in real time to examine the patient in great detail," Wheeler said.

Dr. James Morgan, an emergency physician at the Douglas hospital, said strokes can be treated properly with the right diagnosis.

"When you give a treatment for clots, if it is the wrong type of stroke, it can make it worse," Morgan said. "With the availability of the highest level of specialty, we can make sure it is the right diagnosis.

"Having a neurologist there to make that decision is very welcoming," Morgan said.

When a person arrives in the emergency room in Douglas with stroke symptoms, a nurse inputs the patient's information in a computer system and Wheeler is notified. Then, Wheeler just fires up his laptop and all the patient's images and lab results are there. He can begin his assessment with the patient, physician and family immediately.

REACH Call began in 2003 in Georgia, said Bill Hamilton, chief operating officer of the company who visited Wyoming this past week.

He said rural towns in Georgia were having problems with stroke care.

"Every second care was delayed was creating more brain damage," Hamilton said. REACH Call and its telestroke technology are in Florida, South Carolina, New York, Tennessee, Alaska and Wyoming.

"If you live in Douglas, you want to be able to get the same stroke care as someone in Casper, Augusta, Ga., or New York City," Hamilton said.

Hamilton said the cost of this is minimal because all the hospitals need are some laptops and Web cameras. There is a recurring fee for the service provided by REACH Call, Hamilton said.

Wyoming Medical Center received \$100,000 from the state to implement this program and money from a grant from the Tate Foundation in Casper. WMC will pay for the remainder of the costs.

With only eight other neurologists in the state, Wheeler said he hopes to offer this service at other hospitals, such as in Lander, Riverton, Gillette, Rawlins and Buffalo.

Currently, Wheeler is the only neurologist who will work with the program, but he said a neurologist in Cody and one in Fort Collins, Colo., are interested in working with him.

"There are a number of communities across the state that would benefit from this type of communication," Wheeler said. "When you get into central Wyoming and the western parts of the state, it's really limited."

Contact health reporter Allison Rupp at (307) 266-0534 or allison.rupp@trib.com.