News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Sept. 19, 2023
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Digital Health Takes Center Stage
TTUHSC Announces New Institute of Telehealth and Digital Innovation

Although telehealth took center stage nationally during the COVID-19 pandemic, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) utilized telehealth resources to provide health care to patients in rural areas and those with access barriers 35 years before the pandemic.

Today (Sept. 19), the university announced the establishment of the TTUHSC Institute of Telehealth and Digital Innovation with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. TTUHSC President Lori Rice-Spearman, Ph.D., said the new institute is a part of the university's continued commitment to providing health care access through innovation.

"Serving the health care needs of people in this region has and will continue to be our purpose," Rice-Spearman said. "But as health care transitions to a technology-driven ecosystem, it is imperative that we make that pivot as well, by leveraging digital technologies to expand access to underserved areas and also to transform health care through proactively managing acute and chronic diseases and engaging the patient in their own health care as preventative measures."

TTUHSC Executive Director for the Institute of Telehealth and Digital Innovation John Gachago, DHA, said digital health is the umbrella term for telehealth or telemedicine.

"When we look at digital health, it includes all tools involved in leveraging technology to improve health care such as the cloud, electronic health records, mobile disease management applications, in-home monitoring solutions and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and the internet of things to enhance access to care, improve research and drive digital health education," Gachago said.

TTUHSC's telehealth programs continue to bridge the barriers in the 108-county service area of West Texas through new projects and innovations to expand telemedicine into our most rural areas.

Telemedicine began at TTUHSC in 1989 and was designed to connect the university's original four campuses in Lubbock, Amarillo, Odessa and El Paso, eventually expanding

to connect the Lubbock campus to distant rural sites for the purpose of medical consultations. The first teleconsultation was conducted in 1990 between Alpine, Texas, and Lubbock. Since 1990, teleconsultations have been conducted through most practice disciplines at TTUHSC.

Gachago said the university is strategically positioned to lead efforts to expand digital health across TTUHSC's footprint.

"The Institute of Telehealth and Digital Innovation is building a digital health ecosystem that engages people, processes and technologies such as AI, the internet of things and blockchain technology to transform delivery of health care in West Texas and eventually around the world," Gachago said. "The ultimate goal is to make predictive, precision, preventive and participatory care a reality for West Texans."

Efforts will be aimed at helping rural communities where they are and supporting their infrastructure for expanded access to health care through a "hub-and-spoke" model, which will center around establishing health care hubs at TTUHSC's campuses. From this, the institute will "push" health care services out to rural, underserved areas via telehealth by partnering with local entities to utilize existing resources within the community and in TTUHSC's network rather than pulling health care away from rural communities.

The TTUHSC Institute of Telehealth and Digital Innovation will support health care in rural communities and focus on three pillars:

• Access to care: Increased collaboration with health care and hospital partners in our region to expand specialty care and chronic disease management in a predominately rural service area

• Research: Strengthen the research component to analyze and examine clinical efficacy and health care outcomes

• Academics: Ensuring the next generation of the health care workforce is trained in broader aspects of digital health

The institute announcement was a part of the university's Telehealth Week @TTUHSC, a conference about telehealth and digital innovation that offered an immersive experience in digital health using technology for access to care.

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