

For: Senate Communications & Technology Committee

From: Ellen Mazo, director, Government Affairs / Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC

February 13, 2013

Pediatric Telemedicine / Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC

Good morning, Chairman Vulakovich and members of the Health Committee.

This hearing is significant because Children's Hospital depends on the technological advancements discussed today.

In our ongoing commitment to provide outstanding pediatric health care, Children's Hospital in 2011 opened its Telemedicine Center so that all children throughout the Commonwealth have dependable access to the outstanding pediatric specialty care we provide.

As one of the top 10 children's hospitals in the country as ranked recently by Parents' magazine, and one of 12 pediatric hospitals in the United States named to 2012-13 U.S. News and World Report's Honor Roll of America's "Best Children's Hospitals," Children's is committed to providing convenient and timely access to pediatric services through telemedicine.

We are pleased that Chairman Vulovavich was able to experience first-hand Children's Telemedicine Center – a pioneering example of 21st century access to care.

With telemedicine, we provide interactive health care – yes, telemedicine is face-to-face – by using modern technology and telecommunications.

These visits allow for immediate care. Or they are captured by video and still images – which are then stored and sent to physicians for diagnosis and follow-up treatment.

In only the past 10 years, telemedicine has improved the capacity and quality of distance-delivered health care beyond anything we could have ever imagined.

As you undoubtedly know, Pennsylvania is one of the top 10 most rural states in the country. Forty-eight of the Commonwealth's counties are classified as rural.

But in our beautiful, bucolic state there are only 1,300 pediatric subspecialists in all fields to care for the 2.8 million children who are under 18 years of age.

Break out the numbers in those fields – for example there are only 10 pediatric dermatologists, 16 pediatric rheumatologists and 27 specialists in infectious disease.

This is of major concern to us.

For good reason:

The dearth of pediatric specialists becomes even more pronounced when you consider that 70 percent of the specialists practice only at the two major pediatric medical centers at the most western and eastern parts of the state – at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC and at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

With telemedicine – in this year of 2013 – our children no longer have to be penalized for where they live.

The Pennsylvania Rural Health Association wrote in a report in 2010 that choosing to live in rural America “should not mean less in terms of access to quality health care services across the continuum.”

Its recommendation? Telemedicine.

The Rural Health Association said that telemedicine is what we can do to provide comprehensive health care services to those who live far from health care services.

We agree.

With telemedicine, our patients have convenient access to the pediatric subspecialists at Children’s Hospital without having to travel great distances.

They no longer have to be penalized for where they live.

Think about this: Telemedicine is the natural evolution of health care – of taking health care back to the consumer.

It is as seamless as being able to pick your cell phone and not just call your children or grandchildren, but look at them as you talk.

That’s not so difficult to comprehend, since, after all, telemedicine’s roots are in the telephone. Only 50 years ago, health care providers began offering guidance over the telephone to remote populations in mountain communities.

Telemedicine may sound like a 21st century phenomenon – after all, as we know, the expansion of this technology is relatively new – but it’s interesting to note that telemedicine’s roots are in something we all can relate to – the telephone.

Only 50 years ago, health care providers began offering guidance over the telephone to remote populations in mountain communities.

The landline telephone became the lifeline to people in remote mountainous areas of our country – and that includes portions of Pennsylvania -- people who formerly were out of reach to health care providers.

The telephone is still our connection to doctors in community hospitals throughout Western Pennsylvania.

When children are brought into community hospital emergency rooms, the physicians call the pediatric emergency medicine specialists at Children's for guidance. They do this because – all too often – they are trained to treat only adult patients, not children.

Our specialists provide as accurate advice as possible. Most of the time, the decision is to transport that child as quickly as possible to Children's in Pittsburgh.

With telemedicine, that may not always be necessary.

As one of our pediatric specialists said – what I learn from the doctor is what he thinks he wants me to know.

Moreover, the information may be five to 10 minutes old – a long time when dealing with children, whose conditions change rapidly.

With telemedicine – that is, with the ability to see the patient – our emergency specialists can provide immediate diagnosis and helpful information to stabilize the child.

The miles between pediatric specialist and patient evaporate.

As a result, many young patients may then be able to stay in the local hospital.

As you can surmise from this chain of events – while the telephone is a form of access, it's no longer good enough in 2013.

Our allegiance at Children's Hospital to the health and welfare of all children – which means nothing less than providing compassionate, expert care – is exactly the reason we believe telemedicine is the necessary tool to help improve pediatric health care – efficiently and economically.

With telemedicine, the barriers of distance are minimized.

Without access to telemedicine, families in rural counties in Western Pennsylvania must drive 2 to 3 hours for appointments in Pittsburgh. They bring their children who often have disabling conditions – such as diabetes, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and neurological disorders.

Those conditions often require numerous visits a year.

Not only do families spend countless hours on the road, but there also is a loss of productive time at work and missed school days. Transportation, meals – and sometimes lodging – they all become costly.

There are times, too, that families can't always make the trip right away. Sometimes they can't take the time away from work. Or winter weather – snow and ice on the roads – is a factor.

With delays, children's medical conditions can become much worse – so much so that they may have to be hospitalized.

This is an issue our Administration understands. Last year, the Department of Public Welfare expanded its MA Bulletin to include Medicaid reimbursement for pediatric telemedicine. We worked closely with DPW to demonstrate the huge savings on transportation and other costs that come with this new policy.

At the same time, Children's Hospital and UPMC continue to discuss payment policy with private payers and to pursue reimbursement.

Children's Hospital has set up specialty centers in Hermitage, Johnstown and Erie for pediatric specialties – including in practices of neurology, gastroenterology, orthopaedics, and cardiology.

Our pediatric cardiology division also provides on-site services in Dubois, Erie, Altoona and Greensburg.

Our concern, however, is that resource constraints limit our pediatric specialists' commute to no more than a couple of times a month.

Once at the specialty center, the specialists have even smaller windows of time to see patients because of the lengthy drive in each direction.

With telemedicine, however, patients could still travel short distances to the specialty centers for their face-to-face appointments with their specialists – by looking at a screen.

Today it is incumbent upon to incorporate the technological advances of 2013 for a better tomorrow – and that is seamless access to the outstanding health care all our children deserve.

Children's Hospital – an integral part of Western Pennsylvania's landscape for well more than a century – has always been dedicated to exceptional care for our young patients.

With your leadership in ensuring the technological advances – we will continue to provide the outstanding health care services our families and children expect – and deserve.

Thank you.