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Questions and Answers About the East Tennessee Perinatal Telemedicine Demonstration Project

Q: What is perinatology and why was this specialty selected for the telemedicine program?

A: Perinatology is the medical field of high-risk obstetrics. Its purpose is to provide pregnant mothers and their babies the best of care when pre-birth exams or tests indicate the mother or fetus could have medical difficulties. Doctors who practice perinatology are usually certified as MFM (Maternal-Fetal Medicine) specialists. Perinatology was selected for this telemedicine pilot project because the State of Tennessee is near the bottom in state rankings in premature births and maternal/infant mortality, and because there are no perinatologists practicing in small cities and rural areas of the state.

Q: How exactly will the telemedicine program work?

A: Patients in rural areas will be treated by their local obstetrician or family practitioner. When that doctor discovers the need for a perinatologist, the patient will be scheduled at a nearby clinic or medical center. That clinic will be connected to the offices of perinatologists in either Knoxville or Chattanooga, where MFMs will be able to see and talk with the patient, observe real-time ultrasound scans of the fetus, and gather other medical information via high-speed connections, specialized computer video equipment and digital medical devices. Then the MFM will work with the referring obstetrician or family practitioner to determine the best treatment of the patient and the fetus. Additionally, the network will connect obstetricians in rural parts of the state with MFMs to regularly discuss the latest medical treatments, trends, and issues, and present experts on various topics on a regularly scheduled basis.

Q: How do patients in rural areas get perinatal specialty care now?

A: Usually when the patient's obstetrician or family practitioner sees a patient and determines the need for perinatal assistance, the doctor telephones the specialist and discusses the case. Often to be "safe," the determination is made to schedule the patient to be seen in either Knoxville or Chattanooga, resulting in extensive travel time, interruption of the patient's work schedule, and other inconveniences.

Q: Where will the telemedicine centers be located?

A: The grant from the BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Health Foundation provides funding for 11 perinatal clinics throughout East and East/Central Tennessee. These clinics will be tied to perinatal specialists with Regional Obstetrical Consultants (ROC) in Knoxville and Chattanooga, and further connected to Erlanger Hospital in Chattanooga and UT Medical Center in Knoxville, two of the state's designated perinatal hospitals. The perinatal sites will be added to the 55 existing sites on the CHN Telehealth Network in community health centers and community mental health centers across the state.

Q: What 11 outlying areas will be connected to the Chattanooga and Knoxville specialists?

A: The first two perinatal clinics will be opened in Tullahoma at Harton Regional Medical Center and in Newport at the offices of Rural Medical Services. The remaining nine sites will be added over the next 18 to 24 months and have tentatively been identified as: Livingston, Jellico, Cookeville, Crossville, McMinnville, Winchester, Morristown, Athens, and Sevierville. But those locations may change depending on the specific needs of the area. Perinatal services will also be available via telemedicine at the existing sites on the CHN Telehealth Network.

Q: What do you expect this program to achieve?

A: Tennessee presently rates near the bottom of all states in health outcomes for pregnant mothers and their babies. This program is designed to be part of an overall statewide initiative to improve those statistics. If successful, the program will help reduce maternal/infant mortality, premature births and their related medical issues.

Q: Who will manage the project?

A: The Community Health Network (CHN), a non-profit organization based in Oakdale, Tennessee, will be the fiscal and technological administrator of the project. Regional Obstetrical Consultants (ROC) will provide the day-to-day clinical management and medical personnel. An independent board comprised of CHN, ROC, BlueCross officials as well as representatives from the regional clinics, has been established to advise CHN and ROC.

Q: I've heard about other telehealth programs in the state. Is this a part of those other programs?

A: There are a number of programs underway, but most will not be ready for use for several years. The CHN Telehealth Network is already underway with 55 existing sites at community health centers and community mental health centers across Tennessee. The perinatal telemedicine pilot is designed as a "demonstration" to show how telemedicine can work to improve maternal and fetal health care in the state. Once other similar programs are operational, this project can easily be "plugged" into them. The term "telemedicine" is used specifically for this project as this term describes the practice of medicine

via specialized teleconferencing media integrated with digital medical devices. The term "telehealth," as used by CHN, is a broader application and includes telemedicine, behavioral health services, continuing medical education and other training, and other health care related applications of the telemedicine and teleconferencing technologies.

Q: This is designed for East Tennessee. Can it be expanded statewide?

A: While the first perinatal sites will be located in the East and East/Central parts of the state, the technology will allow other parts of the state to be connected. Perinatal specialists will also be connected to the existing CHN Telehealth Network. Likewise, once the demonstration project has been fully established and proven, other perinatal practices in the state will be able to participate.

Q: Will the program be open to everyone?

A: Any patient needing perinatal treatment will be accommodated into this project, regardless of ability to pay. We are working with the TennCare Bureau and all commercial insurance providers in the state.

Q: Will other medical specialties be able to participate?

A: This pilot project will concentrate on perinatology. However, the CHN Telehealth Network already offers access to medical specialists in dermatology, psychiatry and ophthalmology and is actively recruiting other specialists. Specialists interested in participating should contact Deb Gott at 866-519-2464x04.

Q: I understand this project is modeled from the Arkansas ANGELS project. What is that project?

A: The ANGELS project in Arkansas is recognized as the premier perinatal telemedicine operation in the nation. It connects 40 rural sites to perinatologists in Little Rock and in its four years of operation has demonstrated that lives can be saved with telemedicine. Many clinical aspects of the Tennessee project will replicate the successes of the ANGELS program.

Q: What is BlueCross' role in this?

A: The BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Health Foundation has provided financing for the project. The grant provides a total of \$1.8 million over three years. This money will be used to pay for the staff (including nurse practitioners), as well as the hardware, connectivity, and administrative personnel. The funding will also pay for the 11 perinatal pilot sites to be connected to the CHN Telehealth Network and procure mobile ultrasound equipment that will travel among perinatal sites, as needed.