A diabetes patient is running low on a prescription medication that helps control his blood sugar levels. He is scheduled to see his primary care doctor in a few weeks but needs a medication refill within the next day. Thanks to a new program in Contra Costa County, that patient can avoid a clinic visit or a trip to the emergency room with a simple same-day phone consultation with a physician or family nurse practitioner.

The novel program, called the Telephone Consultation Clinic (TCC), began as a limited pilot in late 2011 and as of January 2013 became available seven days per week. The TCC is part of Contra Costa Regional Medical Center’s expansive five-year Delivery System Reform Incentive Payments (DSRIP) program to improve patient access and care quality across the county.

The TCC program would not be possible without the DSRIP. It’s just one example of how the DSRIP is providing ongoing support for pioneering interventions that improve access and deliver higher quality, lower cost care.

“It’s frustrating when a patient needs a prescription but can’t get an appointment and ends up having to go the emergency room for something that could be handled over the phone,” says Patricia Munoz-Zuniga, registered nurse and telephone triage manager at Contra Costa Health Services (CCHS), the health system which includes the medical center. “The TCC makes advice nurses feel like they are doing something for that patient.”

The way the TCC works is a patient calls into the advice nurse line and a registered nurse on duty determines whether the patient is eligible for a phone consultation with a physician or family nurse practitioner. Patients not eligible for a phone consultation include those with trauma injuries; experiencing shortness of breath; pregnant women; a child with a fever that has lasted more than three days; or a patient seen in-person recently whose condition is not improving.
The CCHS advice nurse line, in operation since 1982, receives about 12,000 calls per month and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. On a typical weekday, between 400 and 500 calls come in and advice nurses make a roughly equal number of calls out to follow up with patients. The advice nurse line employs 38 nurses.

With so many calls coming in and limited same-day appointments available at county clinics and at partner urgent care centers, advice nurses previously often had no choice but to tell patients with immediate health needs to go to the emergency department in Martinez. But the TCC gives advice nurses an additional tool to get patients the help they need. About 75% of calls the advice nurses send to the TCC can be resolved without an in-person visit. From January to June 2013, nearly 4,000 patients were referred to the TCC.

Once a patient is deemed eligible for a phone consultation, the advice nurse pulls up that patient’s electronic medical record and routes the call and medical record to the physician or family nurse practitioner accepting patient calls. Generally, there are up to 60 TCC visits available per day and those visits always fill up. The line is staffed with two providers Monday through Friday 8 a.m.–12 p.m. and 1 p.m.–5 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Diane Shouse, who has been an advice nurse for nearly 15 years, describes the TCC as a great program she hopes will continue. “It is very, very comforting to know that through this program our doctors can do something for patients without them having to come in for an appointment if not needed.” Shouse says. It’s a fast and convenient way to deliver appropriate care conveniently while saving in-person appointments for patients who need them, she adds.

The TCC has the added benefit of helping providers who are working in the clinic to speed up in-person appointments. “It makes the clinic visit more productive,” Munoz-Zuniga says. “The provider on the phone can order lab tests and then tell the patient to follow up with their physician in person. When that patient shows up for his or her appointment, the lab results are already in.”

Dr. Chris Farnitano, the Ambulatory Care Medical Director and family physician who is leading the effort, says the medical center is not being directly paid for the telephone visits because there is no mechanism for billing for them yet. But the TCC is improving patient care and lowering costs. “The TCC is saving money by reducing ER visits and freeing up in-clinic visits for other patients,” Farnitano says.

With federal health reform underway, providers will be moving away from in-person fee-for-service reimbursement and towards new payment models where providers are paid based on outcomes. The TCC is an example of care delivery innovation in this new era.

One important aspect of the program is that all patients who receive a TCC are called back to gauge their satisfaction with a phone consultation, Farnitano says. To date, the TCC enjoys a 98.5% satisfaction rate.

Laura Bixby and Sonia Bailey, both licensed vocational nurses, call patients who are routed to the TCC back to ask about their experience. Many patients say they are happy to have been able to skip an in-person clinic or emergency room visit.

“One comment we get a lot is that patients say the providers really listen and they make difficult situations better,” Bixby says. “I love it because it is a service that expedites people’s needs.”

Bailey agrees. “This is something small that has turned into something big.”

“I love it because it is a service that expedites people's needs.”
—Laura Bixby, Licensed Vocational Nurse