

## **Governor signs bill requiring insurance companies to cover long-distance doctor visits**

**BY MAC McLEAN Media General News Service | Posted: Tuesday, April 6, 2010 8:21 pm**

Standing behind a podium at Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center, Gov. Bob McDonnell talked about the value of telemedicine before signing a bill into law Monday that requires private insurance companies to cover its use.

"This growing medical field utilizes modern technology to ensure that all Virginians are properly diagnosed and treated no matter where they live," McDonnell said during a news conference at the medical center's campus in Richmond.

Meanwhile, state Sen. William Wampler, R-Bristol, and Delegate Terry Kilgore, R-Gate City, watched the event from a conference room more than six hours away at Lee Regional Medical Center in Pennington Gap, Va.

The two legislators, who sponsored the bill, also joked with the governor about making sure he was signing and not vetoing their legislation during their simultaneous news conference. It was broadcast to Bristol Regional Medical Center, Wellmont Health System's headquarters in Kingsport, Tenn., and the University of Virginia's School of Medicine in Charlottesville, Va.

Monday's exchange was made possible through the University of Virginia Telemedicine Network, a joint project between VCU and UVa that links the two university medical centers with 55 clinics in rural parts of the state, including 27 in Southwest Virginia.

"Unfortunately, doctors cannot be everywhere, and for a long time geography proved to be one of the greatest impediments to proper care," said Karen Rheuban, medical director of UVa's Office of Telemedicine.

This network, according to the Office of Telemedicine, has made possible 17,759 "encounters" between rural Virginia residents and doctors specializing in more than 35 fields of medicine, since the program started in 1997.

In each of these "visits," the patient involved has been able to save both time and money because he or she did not have to drive several hours from home to the doctor's office.

"This seems to be a common-sense approach to offering affordable health care," Wampler said of the telemedicine network. "Even a legislator can understand that."

The legislation McDonnell signed Monday, Wampler said, requires private insurance companies to treat a medical visit with a doctor through telemedicine the same way they treat a normal

medical visit in which the doctor and patient are in the same room. Virginia is now the 11th state in the country with such a law in place.

"Why shouldn't it be reimbursable through the use of telemedicine?" Kilgore said, adding that there is no difference between a normal doctor's visit and one facilitated through the technology other than it's carried over a video screen.

The main thrust of the legislation, Wampler said, is that it gives health care companies a "certainty of reimbursement," or a guarantee that private insurance companies will pay them for their use of telemedicine services.

This gives them an incentive to expand their use of the technology, which further benefits people living in rural areas like Southwest Virginia, where they may have good access to general practitioners but little, if any, access to specialty medical care.

Following the news conference, Wellmont's interim CEO Ron Prewitt said his company is working to expand its use of telemedicine. The non-profit health care network is in the process of connecting Lee Regional Medical Center to the state's telemedicine network along with BRMC's stroke center and Holston Valley Medical Center's cardiology program.

"It's in the very near future," Prewitt said of the expansion. "We have the equipment on order."

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The University of Virginia's telemedicine network reaches out to more than 50 hospitals and health clinics across rural parts of the state, including these Southwest Virginia locations:

- Appalachia College of Pharmacy in Oakwood;
- Buchanan General Hospital in Grundy;
- Clinch River Health Services in Dungannon;
- Dickenson Community Hospital, Clintwood;
- Haysi Clinic in Haysi;
- Hurley Family Health Center, Hurley;
- Johnston Memorial Hospital in Abingdon;
- Konnarock Family Health Center in Konnarock;
- Meadowview Health Clinic in Meadowview;
- Mountain Empire Older Citizens Inc. in Big Stone Gap;
- Norton Community Hospital in Norton;

- Red Onion Correctional Center in Pound;
- Russell County Medical Center in Lebanon;
- Saltville Medical Center in Saltville;
- Scott County Health Department in Gate City;
- Southwest Virginia Care Connection in Bristol;
- St. Mary's Health Wagon, Clinchco;
- Tazewell Community Hospital in Tazewell;
- Tazewell Community Health Clinic, North Tazewell;
- Thompson Family Health Center in Vansant;
- Twin City Medical Center, Bristol;
- Wallens Ridge Correctional Center, Big Stone Gap;
- William A. Davis Clinic, St. Paul;
- Whitetop Community Health Center, Whitetop;
- Wise County Behavioral Health Service in Wise;
- Wise County Health Department in Wise.