



Avera eCARE® Emergency in Action: Townsend, Mont.

Broadwater Health Center in Townsend, Mont., is the sole health center for a sprawling central Montana county, and it serves the 5,600-plus people from rural areas and Townsend itself. The hospital had less than 1,000 emergency room visits in 2018, with a daily average of just below three visits.

In 2019, administrative leaders sought out and received grant funding via The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust. They put the funds to use in the hospital's emergency department, where they incorporated eCARE Emergency as an effective telemedicine component to bolster critical services to its team.

In July 2019, the service assisted Elliott Cole, CC-EMT, FP-C, a paramedic responding to a patient who was having trouble breathing.

"It was a serious and tricky situation because the patient had COPD, she had been sick for some time with pneumonia, and she'd been vomiting," Cole said.

"One of her lungs was almost consolidated with fluid; she was also septic and presented with low blood pressure. She was also combative – she did not want to wear the oxygen cannula or a CPAP."

Step-by-Step Support

Cole and his team called the hospital ahead to have a ventilator set up for her care; the emergency room staff awaiting him included a physician's assistant and registered nurses. The team assessed the situation when the patient arrived, and realized quickly the necessity for intubation to help her regain oxygen.

While Cole's experience in health care included time serving as a U.S. Army medic, as well as a paramedic, he had been away from his profession for more than two years. And this was his second day on the job after returning.

The staff pushed the red button to immediately connect to eCARE Emergency for service. Andrea Pham, DO, a board-certified emergency physician, served as his guide and coach during the intubation, although her physical location was some 850 miles east of the patient.





"The video glidescope we were using was new to me, and the technique is totally different than the devices I had used and knew from intubation procedures in the past," Cole said. "Dr. Pham was with me each step, and she had this calm, clear nature in her instructions."

The eCARE team remained "on site" with Cole and caregivers at the bedside in Montana as they stabilized the patient's blood pressure and breathing.

"When a situation calls for an endotracheal intubation procedure, the nervousness in the room goes up. When the person who is doing the procedure is less familiar with the equipment, that anxiety can increase," said Andrea Pham, DO, eCARE Emergency physician. "For us, at the hub in Sioux Falls, intubations are commonplace – we help with them every day. But each one is a little different than the last."

"Sometimes in an emergency room, in a pressure situation, the most experienced provider will take the lead. In this case, that wasn't an option, but because Dr. Pham's guidance was so good, I was successful, and I gained the experience I need in order to continue to have success in my work," Cole said.

An Administrator's Perspective

Kyle Hopstad, administrator of Broadwater Health Center, led efforts to secure the grant that allowed the eCARE service to come to his facility.

"The conventional wisdom from our team varied, as the RNs were all in favor of it, and there was some skepticism as well," said Hopstad. "We also had some administrators who worried about its cost. But we also had two members of our board with personal experience. They had seen how telemedicine works. They were emphatic – we had to add it to our facility."

Cole was part of another scenario involving eCARE in the care of a patient who presented with cardiac arrest.

"That patient is alive because of the fact we have a great team with strong experience – and because eCARE helped that team on the ground," Hopstad said. "This approach to health care is how all health care should be, nationwide. Rural communities like ours need the resources that telemedicine can bring in an effective, cost-conscious manner. It's clearly state of the art and it's exciting to be part of it."

"Like many first responders, I have worked with physicians over the phone or on a radio, but having them visually present through the technology makes a world of difference and can affect the outcome of a procedure or an ED situation in dozens of ways," Cole said. "In some ways, having them separated from us allows them to remain more calm – it's nice to have a brilliant mind guiding you from afar, because they're less apt to be affected by the emotions that boil up when you're in the middle of it."

