

Doctors treat sick with a quick click



Dr Ramana Panda of Telehealth Networks speaks to patient Vanessa Finselbach remotely using a laptop at his Robina surgery.

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A HOME consultation for an elderly patient unable to travel, a specialist diagnosis in a remote Aboriginal territory, or a skin cancer check in a far-flung regional nursing facility – all by laptop, tablet or mobile phone.

This is the type of medical service being offered with technology developed on the Gold Coast.

The brainchild of Dr Ramana Panda, Telehealth Networks promises to deliver vastly improved access to medical care for patients in remote and regional Australia.

Dr Panda, a Pottsville-based general practitioner, came up with the idea while working in areas where access to specialist care was limited.

"I was working on a weekend and

had a paediatric patient with a fracture and needed a specialist's opinion," he said.

"The nearest specialist was hours away and just finding one who was working that weekend was difficult.

"The usual option once you find a specialist is to set up a teleconference, which is expensive, or transport them by helicopter to the specialist, with a parent and a paramedic on board, at great expense."

Instead, Dr Panda arranged for an X-ray of the patient's fracture to be compressed and emailed to the specialist for diagnosis.

"That saved the \$7000 it would have cost to 'chopper' the child to the specialist and saved time in obtaining a diagnosis."

Dr Panda went on to develop medical teleconferencing software that can be used via mobile-phones,

tablets and laptops, removing the cost associated with using a dedicated videoconferencing centre.

"We can provide a virtual face-to-face consultation between the doctor and patient and a specialist anywhere in the country, on a secure network, that can deliver instant assessment and diagnosis of a patient's condition, as long as they have access to the internet," he said.

"We use the 3G network but once the broadband network is rolled out it will be even faster."

Dr Panda has linked up with the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine to access a growing list of health professionals across disciplines ranging from cardiology and dermatology to psychology and plastic surgery as well as GPs and a range of allied health professionals.

"Instead of waiting six months for a specialist appointment, through our network we can arrange for a patient to select a specialist who is available right now and they'll be instantly connected, or we can choose a future appointment time by selecting from the diaries of available specialists or practitioners."

"A nurse in a remote indigenous community or a rural doctor with an elderly patient with difficulty travelling can now have access via an internet-linked device to a top specialist in Sydney, Melbourne or elsewhere and obtain an instant diagnosis."

Dr Panda said patients were assured of privacy because the technology worked via a secure network whereby doctors and specialists dial in with a private password.