

Technology supports families

By Roger Knox, Vernon Morning Star - News

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Kira Alder pulled down the curtain of the new flat-screen television in the third-floor room at the North Okanagan Neurological Association's child development centre, and thought it was the coolest thing that three women were on the TV, waving at her and calling her name.

Alder, 5, a special needs child, was the guest of honour at the official opening of Child Health BC's telehealth services at NONA on Friday. The women at the other end were at a Kelowna Interior Health Authority office linked up to the new centre at NONA.

Telehealth will allow families of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and other complex developmental behavioural conditions better access to the services and support their children will need.

"As a grandmother, our family appreciates having this specialized help in our hometown," said Arella Alder, Kira's grandmother. "I think it's just wonderful. We're privileged to have this in our town, but this is going to help kids in the outlying areas as well."

Telehealth videoconferencing technology helps overcome barriers of geography, transportation infrastructure, or socio-economic disparity by enabling clinical consultation, continuing professional education and healthcare management.

"The first time we see a child we want to do a face-to-face visit to help establish a rapport with the child," explained Randy James, Interior Health Authority director for the children's assessment network. "After the initial visit is made, we can now use this technology of a video conference and still see the child and family. It allows us to do follow-ups in a more effective way. "

The technology also links employees with specialized expertise to various sites within Interior Health. It will also give families who may have a child with a rare disorder the opportunity to have face-to-face discussions with families who have gone through the same thing through the use of videoconferencing.

Tom Christensen, MLA for Okanagan-Vernon and the Minister of Children and Family Development, was on hand to help open the new teleconferencing project.

"Telehealth services save children and their families days of travel and related expenses, since they can access health specialists from their own community rather than travelling to larger centres across the province," said Christensen.

The NONA project involved establishing a dedicated area on the third floor at NONA to accommodate clinical assessments for children, a family interview space, a teaching area for nursing, psychology, speech language, pediatrics and psychiatry, telehealth for clinical consultation and education, a conference and education room and other online, audio and visual resources.

"Improving access to high quality services for children and youth across B.C. is what Child Health BC is all about," said Dr. Robert Peterson, director of Child Health BC.

NONA's Child Development Centre offers early intervention therapies, infant development and supported child development programs, family support and respite, and individualized programs for children with ASD.

"The reason we got involved in this project is to benefit the North Okanagan community by increasing access to the expertise families need, as well as sharing our expertise beyond the region," said Helen Armstrong, NONA's executive director. "This project allows us to extend and improve our services so families and children get the support they need closer to home."

The project is valued at \$287,000, and is funded through Child Health BC, whose lead benefactor is the Overwaitea Food Group.

The funding will allow for two additional telehealth sites similar to the one at NONA to be established across Interior Health over the next two years.