

KO Telemedicine looking at university health career entry program By Rick Garrick

KO Telemedicine is working with Lakehead University to develop an Aboriginal University Entry Program for Health Careers.

"We always wanted to work together with Lakehead University to deliver education through videoconferencing," says Gibbet Stevens, KO Telemedicine's education coordinator, noting that Lakehead University is already offering a pilot program for the 2007/08 school year that delivers two of the Native Nursing Entry Program's six-and-a-half courses, Communication and Study Skills, by videoconference. The Native Nursing Entry Program was originally developed with the assistance of Nishnawbe Aski Nation in the 1980's.

The Health Careers program will offer six courses over a two or three year period by videoconference, beginning in April 2008 if the funding is approved.

"This is for people who want to stay in their community and pursue their education," Stevens says. "By the end of the entry program, they will feel more confident and ready to take on the university program they are aiming to achieve."

Connie Hartviksen, manager of the Native Nursing Entry Program, adds that graduates of the Aboriginal University Entry Program with 70 or 80 per cent averages will receive the same benefits as those in the Native Nursing Entry Program.

"If students get 70 per cent in the Native Nursing Entry Program, they automatically qualify for the four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree program here at Lakehead," Hartviksen says. "If they get 80 per cent, they're eligible to enter the three-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing Compressed Program."

KO Telemedicine and Lakehead University both see benefits from working with each other.

"They have been operating their program for 22 years," says Nancy Muller, KO Telemedicine's clinical coordinator. "We want to partner together with Lakehead University to deliver this program."

"KO Telemedicine has a well established network in terms of communications across the north," Hartviksen says. "They have designated, trained support people in each community. And they have good, dependable equipment."

The two organizations have established a working committee to look into various aspects of the program, such as courses, budget and community engagement details, and have applied for funding from the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch.

The Health Careers program has been under development since a need was identified within the communities to have more community members trained in a variety of health careers.

"There are community members who would like to try a health course but don't necessarily want to move to Thunder Bay," Muller says, explaining that KO Telemedicine's current goal is to enable community members to build confidence in their study skills and develop a network of support while exploring various health careers without having to relocate from their home community. "They will be able to take this program while still continuing with their job in the community."

Muller understands the importance of these types of programs, having recently graduated with a post RN Bachelor of Health Sciences in Nursing via distance education from an Australian University.

“Leaving my family and employment again was just not an option,” she says. “Although the distance education program allowed me to stay in my community and work, I would have preferred one with video conference so I could learn in a class room setting.”

Once the students graduate from the Health Careers program, they will be eligible to apply to a variety of on-campus university degree health programs.

KO Telemedicine’s eventual goal is to offer post-secondary health professional education such as nursing and medicine directly in the communities, in order to build capacity and address health human resource issues that are so paramount in remote and isolated communities.