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UWO nursing students learning, practicing, leading advances in telehealth delivery

Written by Laurie Schlosser, University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh News Bureau

Talking to a nurse or doctor can be as convenient as getting out a phone or laptop. And it is, increasingly, the norm for many patients, not some way around an office visit.

At a time when telehealth appointments are becoming increasingly common, nursing students at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh (UWO) have been mastering skills needed to connect with patients in today’s health care environment—especially with those living in the state’s less populated areas who could benefit from a remote visit option.

Over the summer, a program was initiated with 32 accelerated Bachelor of Science in nursing (BSN) students. They completed modules and received a telehealth “badge.” Seven students completed 13 home visits and provided telehealth education to 19 community members.

This fall, telehealth education was offered to Traditional BSN students in their senior year.

“The purpose of this innovative project is to reduce barriers to accessing health care in rural Wisconsin by providing residents with a well-prepared nursing workforce to meet their telehealth needs,” said Debbie Walrath, college of nursing (CON) clinical associate professor and curriculum design coordinator. “Through an academic-practice partnership between the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh College of Nursing and ThedaCare, the future nursing workforce will be educated on telehealth skills to improve rural chronic illness outcomes.”

**Telehealth instruction**

Leah Wicklund, a Senior 1 nursing student from Rockton, Illinois, said the telehealth education and training involved learning a patient’s health background (mental, physical, emotional and social), understanding their preferences for their health care as well as goals for improving/maintaining their health and finally, learning any barriers they currently face. The next step was educating patients—many from rural and underserved communities— about the use of telehealth and the benefits of the service and provide references to appropriate community/health care resources.

“I personally helped one patient set up an account with his health care organization through their website, from the comfort of his own living room,” Wicklund said. “This gave him a whole bunch of resources that he previously did not know existed to better manage his appointments, consults, medications, communication with his provider and at-home monitoring— among other things.”

Telehealth took off as an effective, remote appoint option when the coronavirus pandemic hit in 2020.

UW-Oshkosh has turned out hundreds of nurses to staff hospitals and clinics in the region and has a reputation for graduating students with the skills sets needed in today’s work environments.

Wicklund, who is set to graduate in spring 2025, with a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing, said her longtime professional goal is to become a certified nurse midwife. A registered nurse, she said she plans to work in a labor and delivery setting and to continue her education working toward a Master of Science degree in nurse midwifery.

She believes her clinical telehealth experience at UWO will help her provide better care to patients in her future career.

“I have gained more confidence speaking with patients outside of the hospital setting,” she said, “and practiced active listening to better understand their situation and unique health care needs.”