

# Remote House Calls Come to Rural New England

A mobile telepresence device helps homebound patients confer with health care specialists. Broadband is a necessity – FTTH is better.

By Joan Engebretson ■ *Contributing Editor, Broadband Communities*

**H**ealth care specialists in rural Vermont and New Hampshire soon will spend less time driving and more time consulting with patients, thanks to a new robotic telepresence device from manufacturer VGo.

Using the device, “specialists can stay in the office and see multiple patients where they might otherwise have to drive,” explains Craig Amoth, director of development and community relations for Visiting Nurse & Hospice of Vermont and New Hampshire (VNAVNH).

The device looks a bit like a Segway with a video screen and camera in place of handlebars. The specialist remotely controls the device via an Internet connection to the patient’s home, which must have Wi-Fi or 4G wireless capability. The specialist moves the device, zooms in to examine a wound and advises the patient and visiting nurse about treatment.

As Ned Semonite, vice president of product management and marketing for VGo, explains, the patient and nurse will see an image of the specialist’s face on the video screen and converse and interact with the specialist in a lifelike manner. The company recommends a minimum of 1 or 2 Mbps symmetrical bandwidth. Fiber to the home is ideal for this application, both for its upstream capability and its reliability.

Each VGo robotic telepresence device sells for about \$6,000. VNAVNH plans to lease four of the devices. Visiting nurses will still need to visit patients and will take a VGo device with them on those visits, but specialists won’t have to travel so frequently. If, as expected, a



specialist can save 30 to 45 minutes per patient, such a device could quickly pay for itself.

“The challenge is going to be getting reimbursed for this technology,” notes Amoth. For now, insurance companies don’t recognize a remote consultation using robotic telepresence as a visit from a specialist. “Ideally, we want to be able to show the efficacy of this so the reimbursement will be there,” Amoth says.

## **MORE USES FOR THE VGO**

Another VGo user is Boston Children’s Hospital, which sends devices home with patients to monitor recovery from surgery. Children can also attend school virtually, communicating with other children and participating in class.

Some businesses use VGo devices to help remote workers feel less isolated. “You can feel more like you’re a part of

the team,” comments Semonite. “You can go to lunch or see what’s happening in the warehouse.”

Although the VGo can’t open doors, multiple VGo devices can be stationed throughout a company location, and employees can log off one and onto another as they move around the site.

In the future, VGo envisions more value-added services delivered from the network. For example, a health care practitioner could advise a patient about a medication and then play a video about the medication on the VGo screen.

The company also hopes to expand the functionality of its product by, for example, enabling it to measure blood pressure and pulse. Remotely controllable arms also could be added. “The vision is to get you to some place where you’re not and replicate as closely as possible the experience you’d expect if you were there,” notes Semonite. ❖

## **About the Author**

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