

Saskatoon doctors make a house call to MARS

Saskatoon was the lone Canadian site and 1 of only 4 worldwide that took part in a recent mock medical emergency designed to test the limits of long-distance medicine.

Doctors at Saskatoon District Health joined colleagues from Virginia Commonwealth University (Richmond, Va.), Yale University (New Haven, Conn.), and a hospital in Moscow in diagnosing — via the Internet — an injured “astronaut” at the Mars Arctic Research Station (MARS) on Devon Island, Nunavut Territory. The island is being used to simulate the Martian landscape. The Aug. 2 test was staged by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the MARS Project.

Participating physicians viewed the patient’s medical data and vital signs on their computers and then conferred online and used special video teleconferencing technology to arrive at a diagnosis. Patient information, as well as the providers’ agreed-upon treatment plan, were subsequently sent back to the attending physician on Devon Island — with a 22-minute delay designed to simulate the transmission time between Earth and Mars. A manned mission to Mars is currently in the early-planning stage.

“It was an excellent opportunity for



Marc Boucher, NASA

Nathaniel Marion of NASA wears the Xybernaut computer used to send patient information and vital signs to 5 sites participating in telehealth pilot project.

our district, both in terms of the research itself but also to be a part of an international initiative such as this,” said Karen Levesque, telehealth coordinator for Saskatoon District Health.

The district was selected for the trial because of its reputation as a Canadian leader in telehealth. The health district,

which serves as tertiary care centre for the northern part of Saskatchewan, delivered more than 1600 2-way, real-time audiovisual presentations to health providers, patients, and the public in the north last year, as part of a pilot project called the Northern Telehealth Network. — *Greg Basky, Saskatoon*

Malpractice fees double for Ontario’s ob/gyns

The Canadian Medical Protective Association warned last spring that some physicians in Ontario faced huge increases in their malpractice insurance fees (see *CMAJ* 2000;163[2]:201). It wasn’t lying. When the CMPA set its 2001 fees late last month, Ontario obstetricians learned that their fees will double next year, rising from \$31 404 to \$60 372. Ontario’s other surgical specialties also face significant increases, with fees for neurosurgeons rising from \$27 900 to \$42 264. (Taxpayers, not doctors, will cover the cost of the increase. OMA President Albert Schumacher notes that obstetricians will pay only their 1986 rate — \$4900 — with the province paying the remaining \$55 472.) The story is much different in other parts of the country. Quebec obstetricians now pay only \$13 944 a year for their malpractice protection, while obstre-

tricians in the rest of the country pay \$27 348. The changes result from regional rating, the CMPA’s attempt to link fees to the medicolegal climate in its 3 regions. Since Ontario courts are by far the most generous in awarding patients following medical misadventures, the province’s doctors face the highest CMPA fees. More bad news is probably on the way in Ontario. The CMPA noted that this year’s increases in the province were “tempered” because of credits applied by the association. When these disappear in 2004, “Ontario members may be faced with markedly higher fees.”

On Nov. 1, CMPA spokesperson Françoise Parent said the association had not received any feedback. “No one has said this is great or this is not so great, but the billing package only went out to members this week. If we’re going to hear, we’ll hear after they get it.” — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*