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Horizon extends Teladoc contract for virtual care in ERs

Virtual care still being floated as solution for Stella-Maris ER

Sarah Seeley

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Horizon Health Network said it has extended its contract with Teladoc until the end of September for virtual care services at the ERs of Charlotte County Hospital in St. Stephen and Grand Manan Hospital. The Charlotte County Hospital in St. Stephen is pictured. PHOTO BY ANDREW BATES/BRUNSWICK NEWS

Horizon Health Network says it has extended its contract with Teladoc Health Canada until this fall, following the success of a pilot project in several rural New Brunswick communities.

In a statement to Brunswick News, Greg Doiron, Horizon's vice president of clinical operations, said in a statement Teladoc remains in place in emergency departments at the Grand Manan Hospital and Charlotte County Hospital, and the health authority's agreement with the company has been extended another six months, through to Sept. 30.

Last year, Horizon pulled the plug on a virtual care project at the Sussex Health Centre – one of two rural hospitals selected for the initiative launched under the former Blaine Higgs Progressive Conservative government.

Horizon moved the virtual care technology over to the Grand Manan Hospital, while maintaining the service in St. Stephen, for the rest of the one-year pilot project.

Doiron has previously called the initial results from the virtual emergency department pilot "promising." Grand Manan Mayor Bonnie Morse has also spoken highly of the project.

The New Brunswick Medical Society has previously come out strongly against virtual care for ERs, arguing it is a waste of government money and has lured some doctors already working in New Brunswick away to Teladoc.

Horizon says 100 per cent of Grand Manan Hospital patients were assessed by a physician after-hours thanks to virtual coverage, compared to 60 per cent when there wasn't virtual coverage.

The Teladoc service is distinct from the remote virtual care service currently being run by eVisitNB. For that program, the province is currently negotiating with Foundever, a Luxembourg-headquartered firm that beat out eVisitNB through a request-for-proposal process.

Brunswick News asked Horizon, as well as Health Minister John Dornan, if Foundever would ever replace Teladoc for hospital-based virtual care. Dornan said he hadn't considered it.

"It's two different operations," Dornan told reporters at an unrelated announcement. He added questions relating to Foundever are "premature" because a contract has not yet been signed.

Health Department spokesperson Sean Hatchard said in an email the province's RFP focused specifically on the delivery of virtual services for non-urgent health needs.

"It was not related to services provided in hospital emergency departments," said Hatchard.

Horizon gave a similar answer.

"At this time, there are no plans to adopt Foundever as a virtual care option for (Grand Manan) or (St. Stephen)," Doiron said in his statement.

Virtual care still being floated as solution for Stella-Maris ER

Vitalité Health Network says virtual care is an option to restore ER hours at Stella-Maris-de-Kent Hospital. The health authority previously told Brunswick News it had "initiated discussions with our colleagues at Horizon Health Network to assess opportunities and potential collaborations" to address the ER staffing issue at Stella Maris.

Vitalité had announced in October that patients will be admitted to the ER until 5 p.m., and services would resume at 8 a.m. the following day, forcing patients to travel to Moncton or Miramichi for after-hours care. Staffing shortages were cited as the reason for the decision.

Brunswick News asked Horizon if Teladoc would be expanded to include Stella-Maris. It deferred the question to Vitalité, which told the newspaper in a statement virtual care was "one of the options" being studied, but did not say if it would involve Teladoc.

"We are exploring different avenues in collaboration with our partners and various suppliers," said the health authority.

At a public accounts committee Feb. 12, Beausoleil-Grand-Bouctouche-Kent MLA Benoit Bourque asked Vitalité president and CEO Dr. France Desrosiers for an update on virtual care being implemented at Stella-Maris.

"We're trying to look at different possible providers and we're trying to find out whether we can do it ourselves through our doctors throughout the network," said Desrosiers.



Dr. France Desrosiers, Vitalite Health Network's president and CEO was unable to provide many details about the re-opening of the acute care beds and overnight ER service at the Stella-Maris-de-Kent Hospital when asked at a public accounts committee meeting on Feb. 12. PHOTO BY SARAH SEELEY/BRUNSWICK NEWS

Desrosiers said the Stella-Maris team was working with the Dumont's ER department to "reinforce continuation" of care, but did not give any deadline for when 24-hour ER service would resume.

"It's a small team, so if one member leaves there's major consequences," she said of Stella Maris, noting ER physicians are highly sought after. "We have challenges everywhere, even at the Dumont, to fulfill these emergency doctors."

The hospital has also been without acute care for more than two years. Vitalité had said in January 2024 that acute care beds at the hospital would be gradually converted to palliative and long-term care beds, with acute care patients being transferred to the Dr. Desrosiers said they have a new doctor, who is a recent graduate, coming in the summer.

Bourque asked if the acute care beds would be able to open in the summer if all went, and Desrosiers said "yes," but did not give an exact timeline for the acute care beds re-opening.

"We cannot give a date for the moment. They're recruiting but they don't have a signed contract," she said in French.

Vitalité told Brunswick News in its statement that re-opening the acute care beds and restoring the 24 hour ER service continues to remain a "priority."

"The full restoration of operating hours depends directly on our ability to recruit and stabilize a sufficient medical team to ensure safe and sustainable coverage," said the health authority. "We are actively working toward this goal, continuing our recruitment efforts at the provincial and national levels."

Residents who have spoken out about the ER overnight closures say they have been left in the dark about when the department will return to full services.



Linda Renaud, a Kent County resident who has helped to organize a petition, letter writing campaign and a protest about the overnight ER closures at the Stella-Maris-de-Kent Hospital said residents feel left in the dark about when the hospital will return to full time ER services and acute care. PHOTO BY SARAH SEELEY/BRUNSWICK NEWS

Linda Renaud, who helped to organize a letter-writing campaign to elected officials, circulated a petition, and held a public protest held last October, said she has not been able to get a meeting with Vitalité officials or any information on when the ER would return to overnight hours.

"It's quite frustrating," she said. "Why aren't they telling us? What's the big deal?"

Though Renaud is pleased that Premier Susan Holt's government is committed to opening collaborative care clinics to give people access to primary care, she noted there are still gaps in emergency services for Kent County residents because the primary care clinics are not open overnight.

"It doesn't solve our problems," she said.

Her group will be getting together to see what other efforts can be done to keep the pressure on Vitalité to act on the need for overnight ER services and acute care.

"We're not going to give up. We're going to try to figure out something else to let them know we're still here," she said.

– With files from Barbara Simpson, Andrew Bates