

New technology aims to battle youth suicides in the north

Written by Joel Willick

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Dr. Ivar Mendez and Dr. Tanya Holt speaking at the University of Saskatchewan. Photo by Joel Willick.

Youth in northern Saskatchewan will soon have access to mental healthcare through remote presence technology.

On Tuesday morning, RBC announced a \$500,000 donation to the Jim Pattison Children's Hospital Foundation to deliver the new technology. This is the first time in Canada that remote presence robots will be used specifically for youth mental health.

Dr. Ivar Mendez, head of the Department of Surgery at the University of Saskatchewan, explains why this technology is needed in the north.

"There is a huge gap in access to mental healthcare, and there is a true epidemic for suicides in youth, especially for First Nations in the north," said Mendez, who also developed this new technology.

Dr. Mendez says youth living in northern Aboriginal communities are six times more likely to commit suicide. Last fall, northern Saskatchewan saw a string of suicides, claiming the lives of six young people.

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According to Dr. Mendez, he is confident in the success of these new robots based on the success of other remote presence technology recently. Mendez recently introduced groundbreaking remote ultrasound technology to the north this past summer.

He says these robots will be operated by psychiatrists who can assess patients in their own homes.

"That is a huge advantage because young people don't want to go to the hospital," he said. "They are much more comfortable in their own homes, and this is part of what we want to do."

The robotic units will be placed in two northern Saskatchewan communities that have yet to be chosen. Dr. Mendez says they plan to place the robots in communities with the most need.

Tuesday is World Mental Health Day.