

## **UC Merced To Digitally Link Rural Health Centers**

By Doug Hoagland

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The University of California at Merced will use nearly \$1 million in grants to digitally connect four rural health centers in the San Joaquin Valley with specialists in Valley cities and other UC schools, university officials announced today.

In a region suffering a physician shortage, patients will benefit because they can tap the expertise of specialists such as dermatologists, psychiatrists and urologists who don't practice in their communities.

The system is called telemedicine.

Rural doctors can use it to hold real-time videoconferences with specialists while examining patients or to store and forward patient information to specialists for review.

UC Merced also will use the money to plan expansion and operation of a telemedicine network, which university officials say will play a bigger role in future health care.

The four rural health centers — which could be clinics or small hospitals — will be chosen by spring of 2008 and connected to specialists soon after, university officials said.

The grants come from three sources: \$500,000 from AT&T, \$250,000 from the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, a task force trying to improve the region's economy and livability, and \$200,000 from the California Emerging Technology Fund.

The fund was formed after the merger of SBC and AT&T, and of Verizon and MCI. As a condition of the mergers, the companies will give the fund a total of \$60 million in the next five years. The money will be used to extend broadband to communities in rural and urban California.