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HOSPITAL SAFETY

A surgical forget-me-not

EMILY BROWN
Bloomberg News

Tagging surgical sponges with a computer chip that can be tracked using an electronic wand waved over the body can cut down on the number of sponges left behind by doctors, a study says.

Doctors leave tools behind in about one in 10,000 surgeries, and sponges are the most overlooked, researchers said. This becomes a problem because forgotten sponges can lead to blood infections, intestinal obstructions and death, said researcher Alex Macario in an e-mail response to questions.

"Sponges are soaked in blood and are difficult to see," said Macario, an associate professor of anesthesia and health research and policy at Stanford University School of Medicine in Stanford, Calif., in an e-mail. "We need a system that is really fail-safe -- where regardless of how people use a counting-system technology, the patient doesn't leave the operating room with a retained foreign body."

Macario said the price of radio-frequency identification sensors, called RFIDs, have fallen to the point where they may offer a solution.

Currently, nurses keep track by noting on a board how many sponges there are before surgery, during surgery and once the incision is closed. X-rays are also used.

In Macario's study, eight regular sponges and 28 tagged with RFID tags that are about the size of a nickel were left inside eight consenting patients undergoing surgery at Stanford University Medical Center. The scanning wand accurately detected the 28 RFID-rigged sponges within three seconds, the study says.

The wands and tags were manufactured by ClearCount Medical Solutions, a closely held company based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The outlay of legal settlements and repeat surgeries to remove retained foreign objects costs U.S. health-care institutions about \$1 billion a year, the company's Web site said.

The study was supported by a Small Business Innovation Research Program grant and the National Institutes of Health. The business grant was given to ClearCount who subcontracted out to Stanford to conduct the study. Macario, the principal investigator, said he has no financial links to ClearCount.

Risk Factors

The risk of retention of a sponge or other tools increases in emergencies, with unplanned changes in procedure and with patients that are overweight, researcher Alex Macario said.

"Confusion and errors occur," he said.

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