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RFID-based system to track sponges left inside surgery patients

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NEW YORK: Radiofrequency identification, or RFID, chips, extensively used in retail stores to track the movement of a product and to deter thefts, have been found to have another versatile use -- in operation theaters. They can help prevent sponges and other materials from being left inside a patient during surgery.

According to a recent study at the Stanford University in California, involving eight patients who underwent abdominal and pelvic surgery, RFID-tagged or untagged sponges were placed by a surgeon. Another surgeon, who did not know which of the sponges contained the tags, ran a wand over the patients' abdomen to look for the sponges. The wand could identify all the tagged sponges and never reported the presence of a tagged sponge when there was none. It took just three second for the tagged sponge to be identified.

The study details have been reported in the Archives of Surgery.

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The traditional operating room practice is for the staff to count the number of sponges before the operation and then count them again once the procedure is over to make sure none has been left inside the patient.

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According to Dr Alex Macario, lead author of the study and a professor of anesthesiology at Stanford, this practice is not fool-proof.

He said more research will be required to determine whether use of RFID chips can be cost effective for a problem that occurs in every 10,000 surgeries. An estimated 1,500 objects are left in patients after surgery in

the U.S. each year. Such mishaps occur more frequently in emergency procedures as well as in operations on obese people, he said

While the cost aspect of the system is not clear, the study reports that surgeons who used it would be willing to pay an average of \$144 per patient.

Surgeons and nursing staff said the system is easy to use. However, they underlined the need for the system to be made fail-safe.

Macario said the study found that the device worked in 100 per cent of the time. The challenge, he said, is to incorporate the new device into the workflow of the operating theater.

The RFID chip placed in the sponge acts as a transponder, listening for a radio

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signal sent by the transceiver in the wand.

Apart from the retail industry, RFIDs are used in tagging pets with individual ID numbers. Pharmaceutical company Pfizer has plans to tag bottles of Viagra with RFID chips to contain drug counterfeiting.

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