Patients at Florida Hospital in Orlando are starting to use interactive computer software as part of informed consent for surgery and other procedures.

The program’s developers believe patients who use the program will deepen their understanding of the procedure. They hope the educational experience will save time and lead to fewer malpractice cases.

The software is the brainchild of cardiologist Scott Pollak, MD.

“The current informed consent process is inadequate,” Dr Pollak says. “We wanted to set a new standard for patients’ understanding of the operation and for the protection of doctors.”

The interactive program is a supplement to the informed consent process, not a substitute, he says. After patients view the program, physicians still talk with them before patients give the green light.

Engaging the patient

“The physician-patient relationship is based on education and trust,” Dr Pollak says. “The program will help patients make informed choices by better educating them. Right now, it is hard for us to educate them because at times they are nervous and under pressure to make decisions. They nod their head, and we tacitly feel they understand.”

The existing process also lacks a way to prove the patient understands the procedure, he notes.

The software uses audio, streaming video, and animation. It explains the procedure as well as indications, complications, risks, equipment, and alternatives, and then tests the patient’s understanding.

A touch screen for patients

Mounted on a cart, the computer has a touch screen that allows patients to stop, go back, and review the presentation. Depending on the patient, the program takes 15 minutes to 45 minutes.

At the end of each section, the patient is prompted to answer questions and must answer them correctly to advance. “At the end, a report card is generated so the doctor or nurse can view how well they did,” Dr Pollak says. The report card is also proof that the patient completed the session. “Everybody gets 100% because you have to answer all the questions correctly to complete the test, but it shows how many times it took the patient to get answers right,” he notes.

Dr Pollak uses the report card to sit down with the patient and discuss concerns.

“It helps me target my explanations,” he says.

Nurses have told Dr Pollak they support use of the program but don’t want to spend extra time explaining to patients how the computer works. “All they have to do is plug it into the wall,” he says. He also believes the program will save the extra time nurses spend talking with patients about their procedures.
**Program for bypass surgery**

Florida Hospital is the first to use the software, employed for patients having angioplasty, catheterization, stenting, and other cardiac procedures. Programs for more procedures are under development.

An interactive educational program for coronary artery bypass surgery was expected to be ready at the end of July, says Cary L. Stowe, MD, a cardiovascular surgeon at Florida Hospital who wrote the procedure module.

He says the program can be customized for each hospital or surgeon, noting the program is based on the latest information.

“I have 6 to 8 patients in my office each day. I spend 20 to 30 minutes with each going over the same thing,” he says. “Using the program, I will still have contact with patients, but I can tailor my discussion based on their knowledge level. It is a time-saver for the surgeon and a good educational tool for the patient.”

So far, Florida Hospital has purchased 10 carts, which cost $2,500 each. The carts and program were developed by Interactive Consent Co (www.interactiveconsent-company.com), a business created by Dr Pollak, software developer Jeff Moses, and attorney Francis F. Pierce.

Dr Pollak says he tested the program 3 years ago with a large number of patients who underwent elective cardiac catheterization. “We were amazed because at first we thought the patients would view the video and would be scared out of the procedure,” he says. “We thought there was too much information for patients.”

In reality, few were scared, worried, or overwhelmed. “People appreciated it,” he says.

---Jay Greene

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