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Excela introduces electronic tags to track surgical materials

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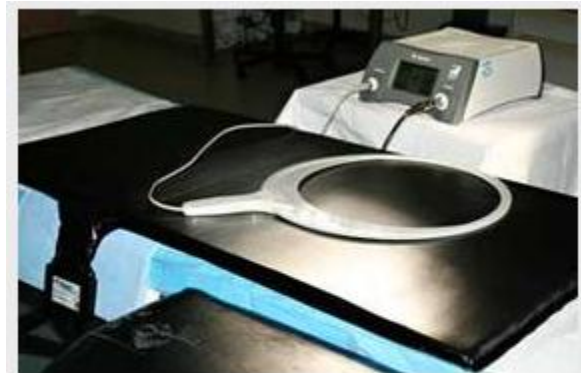
Hospital network Excela Health has begun using radio frequency tags in its surgical suites that improves patient safety and operating room efficiency, becoming the first health system in the region to use the technology.

In recent months, Excela began using equipment that detects sponges and gauze left behind in the patient after surgery. Such occurrences can cause infections, and nurses have historically used manual counts to account for these materials when the operation was done.

Now, these materials are embedded with radio frequency tags, which can be quickly detected in accounting for surgical supplies, reducing the possibility of error and improving overall operating room efficiency, said Dr. Marc Costa, chair of the department of surgery at Excela.

“We still do the counts by hand, but you can confirm the counts in seconds,” he said. “I’ve been pleasantly surprised at how quickly we’ve been able to adapt to this new technology. It’s very quick, very convenient.”

Excela chose Bellevue, Wash.-based RF Surgical Systems Inc. for its detection equipment. The four-year-old company has some 150 clients.



RF Surgical Systems Inc.

Excela Health is using equipment from Bellevue, Wash.-based RF Surgical Systems Inc. to detect any sponges or gauze left behind after surgery.

Operating rooms can be chaotic places, and an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 surgical items are left inside patients every year in the United States, according to a study conducted by Dr. Verna Gibbs, a San Francisco surgeon and founder of No Thing Left Behind, a patient safety project.

And miscounts occur in up to 10 percent of cases, said Dr. Jeffrey Port, a cardiovascular surgeon and cofounder of RF Surgical.

“On a daily basis, there’s a lot of inefficiency, even chaos, in keeping track of what we use in the operating room,” Port said. “Even in the best of hands, there are miscounts, and they occur every day.”

A miscount or failure to locate a surgical sponge delays surgery, increasing the risk of complication to the patient. Also, sometimes an X-ray is needed to verify nothing was left behind in the patient.

The cost of running an operating room is about \$100 a minute, so delays of 15 to 30 minutes to get additional X-rays can increase hospital overhead, Costa said. The technology adds an estimated \$50 of cost to each case, he said, “much less than you would think.”

RF Surgical is among three big players in the operating room supply tracking market. The others are Irvine, Calif.-based SurgiCount Medical Inc. and ClearCount Medical Solutions Inc., which has headquarters in Ross Township.

Each company uses a somewhat different approach to the problem, but ClearCount CEO David Palmer said the overall technology is catching on in medicine.

Although all three companies have focused on locating gauze pads and surgical sponges, the company is working on a way to electronically identify and track surgical instruments.

“Clearly, the acceptance of the technology in general is continuing to increase,” Palmer said. “Historically, there have been challenges in tracking surgical instruments.”

But he expected his company would have a commercially available product to address this problem “in the near future.”

Kris Mamula covers health care and employee benefits for the Pittsburgh Business Times. Contact him at kmamula@bizjournals.com or (412) 208-3825.