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Computer reminders prompt discussion

Advance directives for end-of-life care are a delicate topic to broach; there are no clear guidelines on when it is best or who should initiate the conversation, so usually no one does. But a study published in the Jan. 15 issue of the Annals of Internal Medicine gives physicians a model to follow to prompt the discussion.

Reporting on a two-year study, Indiana University School of Medicine faculty at Regenstrief Institute for Health Care found that nearly eight times as many physicians would address the delicate topic of advance directives with terminally ill or elderly out-patients when reminded through the physicians' electronic computer record system. Without the reminder, only 4 percent of physicians in the study brought up the topic with patients.

"The study suggests that a highly technical aspect of health care -- computers in medicine -- has been able to affect something that isn't highly technical but is highly personal and important -- end-of-life care discussions," says the study's principle investigator, William Tierney, M.D., professor of medicine at IU School of Medicine, and senior investigator at Regenstrief Institute and the Roudebush VA Health Services Research and Development.

"The effectiveness of the computer reminders contrasts with the lack of effectiveness of the Congressional Patient Self-Determination Act (of 1990) and of efforts at intensive patient education, both of which have had little or no effect," the authors state in the article.

Other research has shown that both patients and physicians believe advance directives to be important, but there apparently is a gap in communication as to who should initiate the conversation.

"Our reminders broke the impasse. Doctors initiated discussions in response to the reminders and the patients were appreciative," says Dr. Tierney.

Study participants included 147 primary care physicians and 1,009 patients from the Regenstrief Health Center of Wishard Health Services who were over the age of 75 or who were age 50 and older with a serious illness. Twenty-four percent of the physicians who received computer generated reminders went on to discuss end-of-life care decisions with their patients. And, half of the patients who had discussions of this nature with their physician completed an advance directive.

Reasons physicians would not have initiated the discussion with patients include time constraints, the patient being too ill, reluctance on the part of the patient to discuss such issues, or a lack of belief in advance directives by the physician.

Researchers say they believe the key to the high rate of discussion and completion of advance directives was that the discussion occurred during regularly scheduled primary care visits when patients were not acutely ill and were visiting a physician they knew and trusted.

This \$750,000 study was funded by the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

JAMA illustration

The Feb. 11 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association will feature one of the images created by George Sheplock, MD, assistant professor in the Department of Anesthesia. The image will be figure 11-1 in the book section.

Dr. Sheplock's work creating three-dimensional illustrations of the human anatomy was featured in the Winter 1997 issue of the IUSM alumni magazine, Indiana University Medicine. That article, along with the remainder of the magazine, can be found on the web at <http://medicine.indiana.edu/NP.html>.

Dr. Sheplock is co-author and illustrator of the award-winning book "Regional Anesthesia: An Atlas of Anatomy and Techniques."

Named Professorship

There are three easy ways to submit story ideas or information to SCOPE:

-- fax the information to 278-3502;

-- e-mail the information to mhardin@iupui.edu;

-- or mail the information to Mary Hardin, LO 401, IUPUI.

The deadline for copy is 8:30 a.m. Mondays, the week prior to publication.

IUSM faculty who are not receiving SCOPE at their current office address should contact the Public and Media Relations office at 274-7722 or e-mail their correct address to mhardin@iupui.edu.

Faculty gather for annual symposium

More than 200 faculty members either participated in or attended the 1998 IU Faculty Symposium held Jan. 30 at University Place Conference Center.

Anna DePaoli-Roach, PhD, professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, was the keynote speaker. She presented an overview of her work concerning glycogen metabolism.

There were 127 poster presentations in both clinical and basic science representing the various departments at the IUSM Indianapolis campus and the regional medical education centers.

The 23 platform presentations covered many fields and subspecialties. This year there also were nine exhibits devoted to technology, such as web sites, CD rom systems and Internet connections, with representation from the medical library staff.

Drug testing lab has Olympic support

Did you know?

One of the two drug analysis laboratories sanctioned by the International Olympic Committee and the U.S. Olympic Committee is located at IUSM in the Van Nuys Medical Science Building.

Established in 1984, the Indiana University Drug Analysis Laboratory For Athletic Drug Testing and Toxicology has tested countless samples from amateur athletes for pre-Olympic and Olympic events.

Larry D. Bowers, PhD, professor of pathology and laboratory medicine, is director of the IU Drug Analysis Laboratory. Dr. Bowers was deputy director of the testing laboratory at the Atlanta Olympics.

Drug testing lab has Olympic support

The Division of Toxicology is extending an invitation to faculty and researchers interested in meeting with Jay Gandolfi, MD, an internationally known researcher in the field of in vitro toxicology.

Dr. Gandolfi has been named the Colgate Palmolive Visiting Professor in Toxicology and will be a guest at IUSM in March. He is a professor of pharmacology and toxicology and of anesthesia at the University of Arizona School of Medicine.

Dr. Gandolfi is a leader in the area of organ slice technology and its use in pharmacological, physiological and toxicological studies, said James Klaunig, PhD, director of the IU Division of Toxicology.

A one hour public seminar will be presented by Dr. Gandolfi from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., March 18, in the Emerson Hall auditorium.

Dr. Gandolfi also will conduct two days of laboratory workshops at which time he will demonstrate the production and culture techniques required for liver, kidney and other organs. Openings remain available for the hands-on workshops on March 18 and 19. To reserve a space, please call JuLee Kaster, PhD, at 274-7824.

Painless birth topic of IUSM physician while guest lecturer in China

Ram Ravindran, MD, associate professor in the Department of Anesthesia, was the invited speaker for a workshop in Qingdao, China where he addressed the techniques of "painless birth".

Dr. Ravindran was in China from October 5-14. During that time he did demonstrations at four hospitals on the combined spinal and epidural technique to relieve the pain of labor and delivery. He also presented lectures at two provincial meetings of the anesthesiologists.

Dr. Ravindran said the Chinese anesthesiologists expressed a great interest in participating in an exchange of physicians with the faculty of Indiana University School of Medicine.

<http://www.medicine.indiana.edu>