

Keeping in touch through technology: On the cutting Edge

Apr. 14 – Dr. John Nanfro "syncs" his smartphone while he is shaving or eating breakfast and sifts through patient lab results, vital signs and other updates between home and rounds at Gulf Coast Medical Center.

It's been three weeks since Nanfro got the palm-sized device, and he's hooked.

"I think it's too cool," said the 54-year-old oncologist and hematologist.

Gulf Coast introduced the area's first wireless patient data management system last month and so far local physicians are offering positive feedback.

PatientKeeper software allows doctors access to updated patient data including lab reports, radiology reports and the latest vital signs with a wireless phone connection. The hospital is supplying doctors with Palm Treo 650 smartphones to access the system.

Nanfro reports that the device, which he keeps strapped at his side in a black leather holster, saves him time and allows him greater efficiency.

"It makes an efficient man more efficient," he said.

Jane Johnston, assistant chief nursing officer at Gulf Coast, said 33 staff physicians have been trained to use the program. As word spreads from doctor to doctor, Johnston said more are asking to learn. The hospital is still testing the system, but after a third introductory training phase next month, Johnston said the program should be open to all medical staff.

"It's a huge satisfier in terms of saving time," Johnston said.

Pediatrician Rubina Azam, 31, said the system helps her stay updated on her patients' conditions.

"It's a great mobile tool for helping physicians in daily rounds, making rounds short, helping get the information while you are not close to the computer, while we are not in the hospital," Azam said. "You can be in your car. You can be at home. You can be anywhere."

When she arrives at the hospital for rounds, instead of having to look up her patients' latest information, Azam said she already knows because she has accessed radiology, lab and other reports wirelessly.

"You have a management plan in your mind," she said.

In his line of work, Nanfro said he appreciates being able to access blood cell and platelet counts, among other information, as soon as it is posted. To get the latest updates, doctors sync their phones – similar to

downloading files on a computer – in a process that takes about four minutes, Nanfro said.

Johnston said test results go into the hospital's computer system as soon as they are available.

The PatientKeeper software was chosen, Johnston said, because of expansion options such as electronic signature capability. That would allow doctors to sign off on phoned-in patient information.

Also, at some point, Johnston said, doctors may be able to prescribe medications through the system.

"They have a number of additional features that we're not going with at this time, but that could be potential add-ons," she said.

Patients may not notice the system, but Nanfro said they are benefiting by their doctors being more informed. He said he syncs his phone about four times a day – in the morning, before noon, in the afternoon and at night. The doctor, who has been practicing for 26 years, said he never would have imagined such technology being available in his lifetime.

"This is like 'Star Wars,'" he said.