
Software Identifies Potential Biohazards: Three coast hospitals receive VisualDx

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PASCAGOULA - Three Gulf Coast hospitals are among 17 statewide that have received specialized computer software designed to immediately identify bioterrorism victims.

Memorial Hospital at Gulfport, Ocean Springs Hospital and Singing River Hospital in Pascagoula now have VisualDx as part of Mississippi's emergency preparedness plan. Used primarily in emergency departments, VisualDx is a point-of-care diagnostic and management system that helps physicians and clinicians diagnose and treat patients with questionable skin rashes that could be the result of bioterrorism.

The software compares digital photos to patients' rashes. The software continually expands, covering more than 500 conditions that are illustrated by more than 8,700 digital images.

The program also can help identify common skin rashes and irritants

such as chicken pox and allergic reactions to certain drugs.

"It's very useful in helping us identify obscure symptoms," said Carolyn Gilbert, nurse manager of the Ocean Springs Hospital emergency department. "It also helps us confirm diagnosis, and if we come across something we don't normally see, then it is very helpful to our staff and physicians."

Dan Burgess, trauma registrar at Memorial Hospital, said the new software is an enormous resource and part of the tremendous amount of education provided by the Homeland Security Department.

"It's a resource for identifying all skin problems," he said. "It will be useful if we have a chemical spill. There's a lot that passes through here on the railroad and Interstate 10."

Singing River Hospital's Emergency Department Director Charles Howard said VisualDx is a good product because it uses pictures and symptoms for comparisons. "We have always had reference books to use when needed, but many of them only dealt with presenting symptoms, as good photos just weren't available. This product allows patient information - gender, race and nationality - and symptoms to be entered in the computer and then choices of what could be

potentially wrong with the patient narrowed down."

Physicians and emergency personnel at the three hospitals have been trained to use VisualDx, which was provided through grants from the Mississippi Hospital Association's Office of Emergency and Terrorism Preparedness and the Mississippi State Department of Health.

The Coast hospitals also have other measures and programs as part of their efforts to be prepared for terrorism, including decontamination trailers that have everything necessary to decontaminate patients outside the hospital to prevent bringing harmful chemicals inside.