WAY TO GO, SUSAN AND JORGE!

Telemedicine is an almost magical way of real time sharing of difficult medical problems. By communicating with computer videoconferencing it is possible for physicians hundreds of miles apart to share in handling rare and challenging disorders. Use of this modality is expanding almost exponentially. Recently, two of our esteemed HOS colleagues, Susan Senth, M.D. in Kamuela and Jorge Camara, M.D. in Honolulu, combined their talents to remove an orbital tumor from a patient in north Hawaii. Susan’s surgical skill in excising the mass was enhanced by Jorge 200 miles away in Honolulu, observing and assisting with computer generated images seen via PictureTel’s Concord 4500 video conferencing package. Of course, legal issues must be confronted, such as licensure across state lines (no problem in this case), medical liability, and insurance reimbursement, but the science will surely expand as the technology improves. Congratulations to two of our own on the cutting edge.

LANGUAGE WAS DEVELOPED TO SATISFY OUR DEEP NEED TO COMPLAIN.

We are all familiar with the old joke about a student’s handwriting being so bad, he/she is headed for a medical career. Very funny, except when it isn’t. A jury recently ordered a doctor to pay $225,000 in damages to the family of a man who died after receiving the wrong medication. The patient needed a drug for angina (Isordil), and instead the pharmacist supplied a blood pressure drug (Plendil). Not only was it the wrong medication, but the daily dose was higher than that recommended. The patient had a heart attack the day after starting the drug and died two weeks later. State law requires the pharmacist to call the doctor if any part of the prescription is not clear, but that was not done in this case. The pharmacy was on the hook with the doctor, and decided to settle out of court.

WAITING FOR AN INHERITANCE? TYPE IN WWW.KILL GRANDMA. PBSTV.ORG.

Oregon continues to lead the nation in helping suicidal patients. Now a video entitled “Final Exit” has been produced as a guide to committing suicide. Author Derek Humphry claims his goal is to help desperately ill people and their loved ones, especially those not accustomed to getting help from books or libraries. The video was aired twice on public television. Gregory Hamilton, M.D., a Portland psychiatrist who opposes assisted suicide, stated that the television show serves as a covert suggestion that suicide is okay, and people who are on the edge could be pushed over.

THIS SONG IS FOR ALL YOU DOCTORS OUT THERE, “I'M SORRY I STABBED YOU.” Cathy

The new editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), Catherine D. DeAngelis, MD, generated some heat when she published a study allegedly indicating that nurses did just as well as physicians when treating certain conditions. The editor claimed that the article was newsworthy, and did not say that nurse practitioners are as good as doctors, however that is the tone of the piece irrespective of her protestations. She claimed that good studies stimulate debate, especially those that relate to trends in current practice. Thanks a lot, doc. Since many, many patients improve without medical intervention, it follows that any kind of care will often prove beneficial. A useful study? I don’t think so. At a time when legislatures are beset with bills allowing practitioners to practice medicine, it is hard to see how this report serves to enhance the definition of physicians.

WHATEVER PLAN YOU MAKE, THERE IS A HIDDEN DIFFICULTY SOMEWHERE.

The sudden death of a teenager at the University of Pennsylvania was directly linked to a gene-therapy trial. Gene therapy is alleged to be the wave of the therapeutic future, but that future is getting more cloudy as research continues. Congressional inquiries turned up the fact that a letter was written by an NIH official in 1996, telling researchers they didn’t have to submit certain data about their work to the NIH, even though the rules required them to do so. That official later left the NIH to work at the University of Pennsylvania. Experts estimate that hundreds of patients in gene-therapy trials have died, but supposedly those deaths are largely related to the patient’s underlying illness. Now, not only has it been found that researchers have not reported deaths and other adverse events in violation of NIH rules, but some researchers have been criticized for ties to for-profit companies, and may be rushing clinical trials. The NIH is looking at financial ties that could influence the proper design of a gene-therapy program.

IF IT DOESN'T WORK, EXPAND IT!

The National Practitioner Data Bank (NPDB) continues to generate controversy. Theoretically, the data bank was created to have an ongoing confidential record of physicians who lose or settle malpractice suits. Some doctors have found a way to avoid the bank by negotiating settlements in the name of their hospital or practice instead. Now the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) wants to close that loophole by requiring insurers to report the name of any doctor involved in the care of a patient that later became the basis for a lawsuit, even if the doctor hadn’t been named as a defendant! Also, Rep. Tom Bliley (R-VA) wants to make the data bank accessible to the public, because he is angry at the AMA for supporting the Democrat-sponsored patient protection act. He wrote to Secretary Shalala, “I believe that the availability of such data is vital for consumers to make informed decisions in choosing their health care providers.” And many doctors think Republicans are their friends!

A HOUSE IS JUST A PILE OF STUFF WITH A COVER ON IT.

There is an alarming increase in asthma and other allergy rates in this country, and the dust mite is believed to be a common culprit. The problem is that dust mites thrive in carpets, overstuffed chairs, and cushy bed comforters, and blown-up pictures of these bugs send even the most skeptical consumer running for help. Tapping into consumer fears, marketers have come up with a collection of devices in the war against dust mites. Hoover vacuum claims to make an expensive cleaner that sucks up mites; Proctor and Gamble sells an “electrostatic” wipe to remove dust. All detergent claims it will rinse the mites out of clothes. Gazoontite.com offers thousands of products aimed at the breathing market, and researchers are working on pesticide sprays. Allergists recommend removing sources and controlling the environment as the most effective way to combat dust mites, but meanwhile the marketers are busy moving allergy into the mainstream with ads, medicaments and promises.

YOU HAVE TO STUDY A GREAT DEAL TO KNOW A LITTLE.

In a 1976 decision the National Labor Relations Board ruled that house staffers are “students” not employees, and therefore cannot organize. Now, the NLRB, responding to a petition filed in 1997 by residents at Boston Medical Center, said that house doctors are employees, thus granting collective bargaining rights to more than 90,000 interns, residents and fellows working in America’s hospitals, The Association of American Medical Colleges has taken issue with the decision, stating that the decision erodes the principle of professionalism in medicine. AAMC President Jordan Cohen claimed that giving students the right to strike is incompatible with the medical education process which should not be driven by the marketplace. Sorry about that, Doctor Cohen, but the singular attitude of medicine as a cherished profession that we grew up with, is fast disappearing.

ADDENDA

- Most humans blink about 15 times a minute. Blink frequency decreases with concentration, and ceases completely when auto drivers pass other vehicles at high speed or when aircraft pilots are taking off.
- 19th century Scottish law required brides to be pregnant on their wedding day.
- Sport stars make great role models, especially if you are thinking about a career in crime.
- "Ménage a trois" is a French phrase. It means Kodak moment. Aloha and keep the faith —rts