Facial Imaging May Protect Patient Data, Safety

BY TODD ZWILLICH

WASHINGTON — Electronic bar codes and radiofrequency microchips are all the rage in medical error prevention, but one research team thinks avoiding mistakes may be as easy as snapping a photo.

Researchers with the MedStar Health network here are experimenting with facial-capture software that they believe could quickly and inexpensively help busy nurses and physicians avoid mistakes.

The software can pick human faces out of any photo image in less than a second. It’s tied into a $120 Web camera mounted behind the nurse’s triage desk, and anyone who approaches the desk automatically has his or her face captured.

Nurses can permanently tie a patient’s record with one click.

Nurses “don’t have to pick up a camera, they don’t have to make them say cheese,” Dr. Michael Gillam, director of the Medical Media Lab at MedStar, said at the annual symposium of the American Medical Informatics Association.

The facial-capture technology captures human faces in less than a second and automatically links them to the corresponding electronic health record.

MedStar researchers already developed a state-of-the-art electronic health record system allowing doctors and nurses to view patients’ full charts at a glance. The system, known as Axyzzi, was snapped up by Microsoft Corp. in July.

Now Dr. Gillam’s team is hoping that the facial photo capture system can help avoid errors by capitalizing on humans’ natural penchant for recognizing faces.

“As with most identity technology, privacy is a concern. After all, no one wants to have his or her face on permanent file simply for asking directions to the restroom,” Dr. Gillam said.

Dr. Gillam said that although the system would photograph all comers, images are quickly erased if nurses don’t attach them to a medical record.