Tweets From The OR

Twitter opens door to Iowa operating room; is a way to keep family informed of status of loved ones' surgeries

Monna Cleary, of Lost Nation, Iowa, talks with Dr. Jerry Rozeboom at St. Luke's Hospital, Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2009, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Cleary agreed to let hospital staff post a play-by-play of her Monday surgery on Twitter, passing along real-time information from the operating room to her children in the waiting room and anyone else who wanted to read in. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

Before 70-year-old Monna Cleary underwent a hysterectomy and uterine prolapse surgery Monday at St. Luke's Hospital in Cedar Rapids, IA, she gave the OK for hospital spokeswoman Sarah Corizzo to post a play-by-play of the operation on Twitter, a social networking site on which users post snippets of information up to 140 characters using cell phones or computers, according to a recent Associated Press article.

Outside in the waiting room, the tweets allowed the Cleary family to follow the progress of the surgery from anesthesia to recovery. One daughter-in-law was able to keep tabs from work.

"It's real time information instead of sitting and not knowing in the waiting room," says Cleary's son Joe.

"It made the time go by," says Cleary, who was joined by a brother, two sisters and a sister-in-law at the hospital. "We all feel it was a positive experience."

The AP reports Corizzo sent more than 300 tweets over more than three hours from a computer just outside the operating room's sterile field. Nearly 700 people followed the messages, with eight followers tweeting questions to Corizzo about the procedure and a Cleary family member commenting on how fascinating it was to follow the surgery.

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In this image taken from twitter.com shows the Twitter feed of St. Luke's in Iowa. Monna Cleary, of Lost Nation, Iowa, agreed to let hospital staff post a play-by-play of her Monday surgery on Twitter, passing along real-time information from the operating room to her children in the waiting room and anyone else who wanted to read in. (AP Photo/twitter.com)

The primary goal of the Twitter posts was education, Corizzo said, but it had the added benefit of keeping the family informed during surgery. It also helps to raise the profile of the hospital. The idea to follow the surgery on Twitter at St. Luke's evolved after a similar surgery was Webcast several months ago.

"A lot of people would like to go into the operating room and see what happens but don't want all the visuals and stuff," says Laura Rainey, another hospital spokeswoman. "This is a more gentle way to help inform patients and consumers."

This isn’t the first instance of a surgery described on Twitter. Children's Medical Center in Dallas tweeted in May when a father donated a kidney to his son, and officials at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit have tweeted about several surgeries since January.

According to Dian Luffman, a spokeswoman with Change:healthcare, a business that helps clients save money on procedures, hospitals using Twitter during surgery means that it's entering the mainstream, especially among the 20-and-30 somethings, and hospitals are attempting to build relationships.

Amanda Gillbret, whose husband and son were involved in the Dallas kidney transplant, said she appreciated being able to monitor her husband's surgery at another hospital while she was at Children's Medical Center with her son, AP reports.

"I felt like I was part of my husband's surgery and connected to what he was going through but was there with my son, too," Gillbret says. "It gave me a huge peace and it was just comforting knowing what was happening."

She noted that typically a person can sit for hours in a waiting room and maybe get two phone calls from the operating room. Through Twitter, she received updates every two to three minutes, and it helped family and friends who were not there stay up-to-date.

While the Detroit hospital has tweeted during several surgeries, neither the Cedar Rapids hospital nor the one in Dallas have immediate plans to do it again, but would be open to it if patients agree.

Cleary said she agreed to have her procedure posted on Twitter — but only after being educated to what tweeting was. During her surgery, Corizzo relayed tweets ever few minutes.

Examples of the more than 300 tweets from Cleary’s surgery included:

-"Putting numbing medication where the incisions will be. Making first incision right now.”

-"Right now doctor is cutting across some vessels & ligaments that connect the ovaries to the uterus."

-"Opening up the peritoneum right now," which led to a tweet questioning what the peritoneum is. Corizzo explained it is the sac that lines the abdomen.

The surgeon, Dr. Jerry Rozeboom, said he asked Cleary to participate because she is "very open, conversant and willing to be part of the education process.

"It was mostly a patient who I thought was open to helping other people learn about new technology and maybe helping other women in her situation," Rozeboom says.

Before the surgery, Rozeboom said no restrictions would be placed on what could be included, AP reports, but he made it clear that if it became a distraction or a complication arose, the tweeting would stop.

In her tweets, Corizzo detailed the robotic equipment used for the surgery and included photos that showed Rozeboom at the control panel of the equipment and an internal image showing stitches being put in place. She also tweeted about the causes and symptoms of the condition that led to Cleary's surgery. Once the procedure was done, Corizzo sent a final tweet to Cleary's family.

"She's doing great. She'll see you soon."

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