

Seeking to Empower Patients



Frank McKee, president of St. Andrew Development, shows a sample of the company's health education kiosks in its York office. The kiosks provide information about tobacco use, women's wellness and breast cancer, among other topics. St. Andrew is trying, without success, to market a patient safety program to hospitals. (Daily Record/Sunday News - Paul Kuehnel)

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A local company struggles to market a patient safety program to hospitals

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St. Andrew Development, a health education company in York, thinks it designed a much-needed product.

Its patient safety program shows hospital patients how to spot doctors with lax hand-washing or glove-handling habits.

The company could deploy the program as a kiosk in a hospital lobby, teaching patients to speak up if they haven't been properly identified, fear they might be getting the wrong medication or need a clearer explanation of their surgical site and procedure.

The program might sound great, but company president Frank McKee calls it his "greatest failure."

McKee pitched it to 25 hospitals in Pennsylvania and Maryland, but none were interested.

Jim Bagian, a doctor well versed in safety system design, wrote the program.

McKee then worked with the company's director of business development, Valerie Del Grosso, to translate the information into laymen's terms.

Providing easy-to-understand health advice is the company's focus.

Its kiosks offer information on dieting, exercise, asthma, diabetes and smoking prevention, among many other topics, and can be found in malls, supermarkets, schools and hospitals all over the country, Del Grosso said.

St. Andrew also designed a children's video game promoting healthy eating that's set up in a boys and girls club and produced DVDs containing information about breast cancer that were distributed to local women through a county health department in New Jersey.

If a hospital became interested in St. Andrew's patient safety program, the company could deploy it as a kiosk stationed somewhere inside the hospital or make it into a Web site that the hospital's patients could peruse.

Arming patients with new knowledge makes them less prone to a hospital-acquired infection, McKee said.

But getting the hospitals to show interest in the patient safety program is tough.

WellSpan Health, for instance, distributes its own brochure containing patient safety information, spokesman Barry Sparks said.

The brochure outlines the ways patients can help improve their care, including knowing their medicines, making sure that hospital staff check their identifying armbands and bringing a friend or family member to the health care facility to help them remember questions for the doctor.

Patients at Memorial Hospital receive a booklet, spokeswoman Josette Myers said, which outlines "everything you would want to know during your stay."

"Errors can happen," the booklet states, "despite continuous efforts from the health care industry to eliminate them."

Therefore, patients should ask all health-care workers who contact them directly whether they have washed their hands, make sure physicians know about all medications they are taking and speak up if they have questions or concerns, the booklet states.

St. Andrew's program is "an interesting concept," said Rick Wade, senior vice president of the American Hospital Association. Its quest to empower patients is a noble one, Wade added.

But hospitals might balk at such products, Wade said, because of their cost or fears that the products won't fit in with what they're already doing.

McKee and Del Grosso have a personal interest in curtailing hospital-acquired infections. McKee's father died after being sickened in a health-care facility, he said. Del Grosso's father has a hospital-acquired infection, she said.

About 1.7 million infections occur in American hospitals each year, according to the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention, a number that might fall, Del Grosso said, if St. Andrew can get its message out.

The program became available in 2005. McKee is frustrated with the lack of interest in it. He opened the program on a laptop in his office recently and stared blankly at it.

Del Grosso, on the other hand, still promotes the patient-safety program whenever she can. Empowering patients is too important a mission to let the product fizzle, she said.

"I have great faith in people," Del Grosso said. "I do believe that someone is out there, someone who's in a position to make that change, and I do believe I'll meet that person."

PATIENT SAFETY PROGRAM

Hospital patients can ensure a safer stay if they're aware of the following information, contained in St. Andrew Development's patient safety program, according to the York-based health education company's Web site:

--- Make sure doctors, nurses and aides wash their hands, foaming for no less than 15 seconds.

--- Insist that your full name and date of birth be used at every step of your pre-operative session.

--- When reporting for treatment, have a list of medication you are taking.