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Health Insurers Show Employees Graphic Surgery Videos

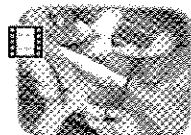
By SARAH RUBENSTEIN
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Consumers clicking through a health insurance Web site, past the doctor directories, claim forms and benefits summaries, may happen upon something a little more compelling: live-action surgery videos.

There is the diabetic foot-ulcer procedure, in which forceps peel away dead tissue as blood drips down the foot. There is the skin-cancer footage, in which a scalpel cuts into the fine, wrinkled skin on the hand of an elderly woman. And there's the cataract video, which shows a needle piercing an eye, while a narrator explains that the needle is used to "fragment the lens into thousands of little pieces and suction it" away.

The videos are designed to educate patients about their health and help them go into surgery with realistic expectations, according to the companies that create the videos and the insurers and employers making them available to workers.

SIMULATED SURGERY



Watch videos of simulated surgeries for the following procedures:

- Discectomy and Spine Fusion¹
- Total Hip Replacement²
- Laparoscopic Gallbladder Removal³
- Plus, watch a videotaped total knee replacement surgery⁴ (Contains graphic images)


They are also designed to save money, the companies say. Health-care administrators believe that the videos may persuade people to take better care of themselves so they don't need complicated, expensive procedures -- or at least to ask doctors more questions before agreeing to head into the operating room.

Videos of surgery, some of which are live action, some animated simulations, can tell employees, "this is your future" if you keep up unhealthy habits, says Robert Meehan, director of compensation and benefits for

Tempe, Ariz.-based ASML US Inc., a unit of ASML Holding NV, a Dutch company, which makes machines for computer-chip manufacturing. About 1,000 of the subsidiary's 1,600 employees have access to the foot ulcer, skin cancer and cataract videos, among others, as part of an online medical library provided through ASML's insurance administrator. "Sometimes you have to shock people a little bit just to get their attention," says Mr. Meehan, adding that while he doesn't consider these videos shocking, they do "grab your attention." ASML has used the videos for a few years, but hasn't measured their effect on employee surgery rates.

Videos of surgical procedures are among the latest tools, from preventive-care guides to online drug cost software, that insurers and health-plan administrators are using to educate patients. It is part of

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the push toward so-called consumer-driven health care, a movement that encourages patients to be more discriminating shoppers, in part by requiring them to spend more of their own money. Employers that use the videos say they don't yet know whether they make a tangible difference. But the companies think the videos will raise awareness.

"You want to make sure that folks are truly getting surgery because they need it ... instead of just letting it happen," says Doug Kronenberg, chief strategy officer at Lumenos Inc., an Alexandria, Va., health plan that posted animated simulations of 27 procedures on its Web site in August. While those simulations show no blood, Mr. Kronenberg, watching them, reports, "I'm a little queasy."

Still, they are mild fare compared with live-action material like the foot-surgery and cataract videos, which were created by WorldDoc Inc., a business started in Las Vegas in 1999 by a group of 14 doctors. WorldDoc's online medical library also includes still photos.

Some health-industry professionals like the one-two punch that a photo and video together can deliver. Graphic photographs are a "quick, down and dirty" way for employees to do a first diagnosis of their own health problems, says Phil Pasley, vice president of marketing for Insurance Management Administrators of Louisiana Inc., a unit of UHY Advisors Inc. that encourages employers to use WorldDoc products.

"Then, if there's any video of the surgical outcome, you can watch that, and get a concept of what's going to happen to you -- if you can stand to watch it," says Mr. Pasley. A patient given a choice between surgery for a foot problem, and a corrective device, he says, might watch the video, then opt for the device. "I think it can absolutely work from a cost-saving perspective and an educational perspective."

Though most national insurers haven't rushed to the surgical videotape, the services have reached some prominent employers such as **Fujitsu** America Inc. and the city of Las Vegas, clients of Lumenos, a unit of health-insurance giant **WellPoint** Inc.

Jeanette McBride, a customer service manager for Banta Corp., based in Menasha, Wis., has a Lumenos health plan and recently looked at a video simulation and written material to understand why her mother has been limping since her hip-replacement surgery last year. "Some of [the images] kind of creep me out a little bit," Ms. McBride says. But, she adds, the videos can help "you make decisions."

Such queasiness is the kind of reaction that can work in employers' and insurers' favor. Graphic Surgery LLC, a St. Louis company that licenses its video simulations to Lumenos, also provides a Web calculator that projects an employer's annual costs from common surgeries. The calculator also estimates savings that can result from educating employees about surgeries, says Graphic. A specific list of surgeries -- including spine fusions, hysterectomies and knee arthroscopies -- could cost a company about \$2.4 million a year for a company with 10,000 workers, Graphic says. But if the company educates employees, according to Graphic's calculator, it could cut that by \$217,305.

Graphic's video service costs \$8,520 a year for a company with 1,000 workers, with additional employees priced at a discount. Doe Run Co., a St. Louis metals company, bought the service about a year ago. For reasons that are unclear, Doe Run employees' rate of gallbladder surgery is twice the national average, says Barb Shepard, vice president of human resources and community relations.

She says the company hopes that candidates for that surgery will watch a Graphic simulation, learn more about the procedure and have conversations with their doctors about whether they need it. If they do need it, she added, the videos wouldn't stop them from getting it.

Watching such videos can "empower" patients to question their doctors, says Paul Mackey, who works in benefits administration at Alliance Coal LLC, a Tulsa, Okla., mining company with 2,300 employees that is a unit of **Alliance Resource Partners LP**. Alliance Coal bought WorldDoc's services in July. For many people, "what a doctor says, goes," says Mr. Mackey. Patients "may not even question that doctor's recommendation."

But some physicians have mixed feelings about the visual displays. "There's a shock value to this, and just the shock value is going to scare some people away" from surgery that may benefit them, says Richard de Asla, an orthopedic surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Dr. de Asla says he uses models, photographs and X-rays to help patients understand what will happen in surgery, focusing on the "the crux of the matter" -- what will happen to their bones -- rather than, for instance, exactly where he'll cut into their skin.

Stephen Neeleman is a surgeon and the founder of HealthEquity Inc., a Salt Lake City-based health and financial benefits administrator that uses WorldDoc videos. He says that what is most frightening for patients isn't photos or video -- it's a lack of knowledge. "Once you inform people and educate them, they're liberated, even if it is graphic," says Dr. Neeleman. Plus, he adds, "Let's face it, people love watching the Discovery Channel," referring to the "Extreme Surgery" cable television show.

Annette O'Connor, a senior scientist at the Ottawa Health Research Institute, recently co-chaired an international group that developed standards for effective "decision aids" for patients. Such tools can play an important role in reducing unnecessary surgeries, she says. But, she adds, "You don't have to go into the gore."

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