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Hospital's new bioterrorism system tracks illness trends

The computer software program at Memorial Health's MedStarOne will track illness trends just in time for this week's G-8 Sea Island Summit.

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Next time you phone 911 to report breathing problems or abdominal pain, chances are your symptoms and location will light up on Memorial Health's new surveillance map that tracks outbreaks, including possible bioterrorism attacks.

If yours is among an abnormal pattern of calls in Chatham County, emergency personnel and public health officials will be alerted via pagers, faxes, e-mail and wireless messaging.

Then, if everything works correctly, they'll implement precautions, when necessary.

The 'biosurveillance' software program at Memorial Health's MedStarOne was put in place just in time for this week's G-8 summit, which Attorney General John Ashcroft warned was a potential terror target.

The system, funded by a federal grant, is the first of its kind in the state, said Rick Shores, director of MedStarOne.

"It's great timing and perfect for the G-8," Shores said. "It gives us availability to act more quickly and provide more care."

The program also will be at work long after G-8 dignitaries, international media and armed security have departed coastal Georgia.

Called the FirstWatch Biosurveillance System, the software works by scanning 911 calls dispatched to MedStarOne, which handles the majority of emergency calls - covering the area north of Eisenhower and the eastside and westside communities, Shores said.

The program tracks the symptoms and complaints reported by patients, then compares it with the area's historical data on those types of calls, as well as symptoms associated with certain problems, such as exposure to anthrax and smallpox. It updates the data every minute.

For example, the system watches for suspicious geographic clusters. So if more people than usual report abdominal pain within one hour, the software will display where the calls are and alert health officials, indicating a

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possible food-borne outbreak in the area.

In addition to rare potential epidemics such as SARS outbreaks and anthrax scares, it detects seasonal diseases such as influenza.

"It will show that maybe there is some kind of toxin release in the area," Shores said.

The system also tracks suspicious packages and frequent problems including car crashes and drownings.

Before this system, such notifications and identification of trends were done in a more informal, less timely manner.

"In the past, we would find out over several days if you have a problem in the city," said Mary McNally, nurse epidemiologist and director of the Center of Infectious Diseases at Memorial Health University Medical Center.

But the new program will help the hospital and public health officials detect emerging diseases and outbreaks even before the patients reach the emergency department, McNally said.

"A lot of my colleagues in others cities who work in infectious disease are calling me and asking about it," McNally said. "Just by watching this on a daily basis, we will be able to detect trends. It is going to be a very large benefit, not only to Memorial but to the community."

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