In this story about cutting-edge innovation in hospital care, you won't read about robots or nano-devices so small you need a microscope to see them.

These next best things in health care are socks, sashes, work sheets and cards; homely items are transforming hospital care in Sacramento and around the country.

After introducing a sock color-coding concept, patient falls at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center, Roseville dropped 25 percent.

At the same hospital, nurses using yellow sashes while administering medication -- and issuing bar codes to patients -- slashed medical errors by 80 percent.

At least 100 Americans will die today from a preventable medical error. Annually, somewhere between 44,000 and 98,000 preventable medical mistakes are fatal, according to the Institute of Medicine, a federally chartered nonprofit group that researches health improvement. That's more than from car accidents, plane crashes and workplace injuries combined.

It's a serious problem with an answer that isn't necessarily high-tech, experts say.

"A computer will allow you to make a mistake faster and with greater magnitude than a paper system," said Fran Griffin, a director at the nonprofit Institute of Healthcare Improvement, which has led several national campaigns to improve hospital safety.

Improvement happens when front-line hospital workers identify an issue and find a simple solution that can be incorporated into their daily routines.

Alicia Zuniga, a patient at Kaiser Roseville's orthopedic ward, wears bright red sock booties instead of the traditional hospital blue or gray.

Dubbed "Ruby Red Slippers," the socks are a homegrown solution that alerts staffers that Zuniga is at high risk for falling. They know immediately she needs assistance.
Zuniga said she's been found wandering the hallways alone.

"Somebody always rushes over to me right away," she said from her hospital bed. "They pay more attention to me because I have these socks on."

Zuniga was waiting for her nurse, Mary Chittattu, to administer pain medication. Before Chittattu started, she grabbed a sash that hung off one of the unit's portable computers, and looped it on. The sashes are bright yellow and made from reflective material; it's the hospital's "Do Not Disturb" symbol.

Administering medication requires intense concentration. It's a job frequently bungled; medication errors harm at least 1.5 million people a year, according to the Institute of Medicine.

The sashes were piloted at a different Kaiser hospital; once one hospital finds an effective way to reduce errors, it shares the solution with others. All three Kaisers in the Sacramento region now use the sashes.

"See, until I take it off, nobody can talk to me," Chittattu said after she finished. "It's just me and the patient."

If the health care industry attracts the best and brightest, why are these solutions just now being introduced?

The answer cuts straight to the heart of medical culture. Doctors are taught volumes about good medicine but much less about how it's delivered.

Between hospitals and individual caregivers, there is little standardization. As a result, medicine in practice often is more art than science. Health care workers are human and humans slip up. Griffin likens it to forgetting to attach a document to an e-mail. Except in medicine, lives are at stake.

This attitude has changed in recent years, experts say. Hospitals are now more open to low-tech solutions that might require staff to adhere to a set of rules.

Still, it's not easy. At Sutter Roseville Medical Center, every nurse had a different way of giving shift reports, which is how patients get transferred to the next shift's nurse. Nurses designed report templates on personal computers. They had special ways of folding them. Each nurse emphasized different information.

About a year ago, Sutter Roseville began standardizing shift reports. It took eight months of revisions to figure out how to condense vital information from different departments into one sheet of paper. Nurses had to give up their personal shift reports.

"We all create our own ways of thinking, and to give that up and go to a single process is very difficult," clinical nurse specialist Kristine McNeill said. "It's like changing the way you talk."

Nurses have been using the new shift reports for a month. Most staff members have embraced it, McNeill said.

"It's saved time overall, and truly streamlined the reporting process," she said.

Sometimes the innovations seem almost gimmicky. At one of UC Davis' surgery
units, an oversized photo over the medication machine features several unit nurses posing in the "shush" gesture. People look at the photo quizzically, said nurse manager Marcie Flores, but it shuts them up.

On the third floor of Kaiser's South Sacramento Medical Center, nurses hand out "quiet cards" to one another and to visitors as a reminder to keep voices down. Patients healing from surgeries need lots of rest, and chatty nurses are a major complaint.

Previously, the staff tried lights that went off when noise exceeded 70 decibels -- everybody ignored them.

They tried "shushing" -- people got offended.

They tried bells, but that came off as more strident than any human voice.

Then they started handing out prettily decorated cards with zenlike quotes to noisy offenders. People weren't taken aback.

"The initial reaction is always, 'Oh! Sorry, OK,' " said Haesook Kim, Kaiser's third-floor nursing manager.

As cute as these cards are, they work. Within three months of using "quiet cards," the number of patients who rated stays as quiet increased 30 percent. A survey several weeks ago found 90 percent of patients rated the floor as quiet. The quiet campaign is now set to spread to all Kaiser hospitals in the area.

On a recent visit to the third floor, it was calm as a yoga class. Floral posters proclaiming "you are entering a healing environment" lined the walls, and the loudest sound was the clacking of a staffer's shoes. At shift change, a nurse tolled a gentle bell.

With a smile and a shoulder touch, a visitor was handed a "quiet card" after asking a question too loudly.

"Our patients heal better when it's quiet," the nurse whispered.

So simple, so easy, yet so important.

Call The Bee's Anna Tong, (916) 321-1045.

LOAD-DATE: September 15, 2009

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: RENÉE C. BYER / rbyer@sacbee.com

Alicia Zuniga, recovering from knee surgery, wears red socks to indicate that she is prone to falls. Nurse Mary Chittattu had just finished helping her with a short walk.

Kaiser nurse Mary Chittattu wears a yellow shoulder sash as a signal to not interrupt her as she measures pain medicine for a patient.

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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Hospitals stem mistakes with colored socks and sashes; Simple things send a safety signal Sacramento Bee (California) September 14, 2009 Monday