

# Computers Reading Doctors' Notes?

## VA Study Finds Significant Benefits to Patients

WASHINGTON – With electronic health records, computers have proven their worth in tracking, sorting and displaying data. A new study by research from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) showed computers that scan doctors' notes can reduce dangerous complications after surgery.

“The excellent care VA provides to our Nation's Veterans relies, in part, on our electronic health records,” said Dr. Robert Petzel, VA's under secretary for health. “This latest study shows how we can continue to improve the usefulness of our electronic medical records.”

The study relied upon a Google-like technology called “natural language processing.” It examined the complete text in medical records – especially doctors' notes – to pick up clues for possible post-surgery complications.

Looking at the records of about 3,000 VA patients between 1999 and 2006, the technology was able to dramatically increase the automated detection of complications such as acute renal failure, deep vein thrombosis, sepsis and pneumonia after surgery.

“The significance of this study should not be underestimated,” said Dr. Ashish Jha, a VA researcher in Boston. “These findings suggestion that electronic health records can transform health care delivery.”

The study was reported in the Aug. 24 edition of the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association*.