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Wireless hospitals systems can disrupt medical devices

By Lindsey Tanner
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Wireless systems used by many hospitals to keep track of medical equipment can cause potentially deadly breakdowns in lifesaving devices such as breathing and dialysis machines, researchers reported Tuesday in a study that warned hospitals to conduct safety tests.

Some of the microchip-based "smart" systems are touted as improving patient safety, but a Dutch study of equipment — without the patients — suggests the systems could actually cause harm.

A U.S. patient-safety expert said the study "is of urgent significance" and said hospitals should respond immediately to the "disturbing" results.

The wireless systems send out radio waves that can interfere with equipment such as respirators, external pacemakers and kidney dialysis machines, according to the study.

Researchers discovered the problem in 123 tests they performed in an intensive-care unit at an Amsterdam hospital. Patients were not using the equipment at the time.

Electromagnetic glitches occurred in almost 30 percent of the tests when microchip devices similar to those in many types of wireless medical equipment were placed within about one foot of the lifesaving machines.

Nearly 20 percent of the cases involved hazardous malfunctions that would probably harm patients. These included breathing machines that switched off, mechanical syringe pumps that stopped delivering medication; and external pacemakers that malfunctioned.

The wireless systems are used to tag and keep track of medical equipment like heart-testing machines, joint replacements and surgical staplers.
State employees lobby for pay increase

By Gary D. Robertson
The Associated Press

RALEIGH — House and Senate negotiators are getting down to business on finalizing a state government budget for next year, but differences remained Tuesday on many of the key items highlighted in the respective spending plans they passed.

Democratic leaders in both chambers are aiming to complete a roughly $21 billion budget before the new fiscal year begins July 1.

“We’ve got several days and the weekend,” said Rep. Maggie Jeffus, D-Guilford, one of the House’s negotiators, as another round of talks began Tuesday afternoon. “We’re just beginning the negotiations but I think they’ll begin to move along quickly.”

Interest groups seeking to sway the Legislature — state employees, public school education leader and even Republicans — offered suggestions publicly Tuesday. Some called for higher pay raises, others for more education spending, and even less spending overall.

More than 200 members of the State Employees Association of North Carolina who were lobbying lawmakers Tuesday, said they deserve the same percentage pay raise as school teachers, along with a $1,000 bonus.

Both House and Senate spending plans offered average 3 percent raises for teachers and the greater of 2.75 percent or $1,100 for other state employees.

Association executive director Dana Cope said raising the state employee percentage to 3 percent — at a cost of $8 million — would show that the General Assembly appreciates them during rough economic times.

“We think that that would achieve parity and send a strong message to all of the state employees across North Carolina that they are respected and treated with dignity,” Cope said. The bonus would cost another $20 million to $25 million, Cope said.

Several state employees attending the rally held up signs that said they work a second job to make ends meet. And things are even worse with gasoline at $4 per gallon.

“We’ve got to have better pay so we can survive,” said Dennis Hartley, 47, of Landis, a correctional officer at Piedmont Correctional Institution in Salisbury. Hartley said he works at a convenience store to supplement his roughly $36,000-per-year salary, help his children through school and assist his ailing wife.

A shift sounds unlikely, since the House and Senate budget plans were in agreement on salaries for both teachers and other state employees.
More scrutiny vowed at NCCU

Computer misuse costs 2 their jobs

BY ERIC FERRERI  
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM — A recent discovery that two N.C. Central University employees used campus computers to download music, movies, software and pornography revealed both positives and negatives about the institution's internal checks and balances, trustees concluded Tuesday.

In the win column: NCCU's internal process for detecting and ferreting out bad behavior worked. The discovery was prompted by an anonymous e-mail message to Chancellor Charlie Nelms, who discussed it with the university's interim audit director before getting the university system involved.

A state audit ultimately found, among other things, that a database administrator had used campus computers to download about 100 movies, some of them pornographic, for personal use. The two employees involved have been fired.

"People made a complaint, and we investigated the complaint," Nelms said Tuesday during a Board of Trustees retreat that spent a good deal of time deconstructing the recent audit findings. "Our system did indeed work."

In the loss column: The investigation revealed a glaring lack of staffing within the university's audit department, where just two of six positions are filled. To properly investigate the computing allegations, the university needed the services of two information technology experts with the UNC system and a forensic computer analyst from UNC-Chapel Hill.

"We have never been able to maintain consistency in the audit department," trustee Eric Michaux said. "The confluence of a lack of staff and audit findings are sometimes at odds with each other."

NCCU has never had an auditor specifically dedicated to monitoring the university's information technology systems. Nelms acknowledged that the university is behind the times with nobody in that role but pledged to hire someone soon as part of a revamping of the audit department.

"The staffing isn't what it needs to be in a number of areas," Nelms said. "The budget is being realigned and we're addressing that."

Though trustees said they were pleased that the computing culprits were caught, Nelms said there is only so much an institution can do to stave off bad behavior. Beefing up the audit department may help to root out malfeasance but not necessarily prevent it.

"No matter how much staff you have, you cannot prevent fraudulent activity," he said. "We will have policies and procedures in place ... to reduce the chances of fraudulent activity."

Trustees peppered university officials with audit questions for much of an hour Tuesday. The computing audit comes about four months after a state audit found that an assistant provost at NCCU, Franklin Carver, had an improper relationship with a student, used a state credit card for personal purchases, and misused more than $36,000 in federal grant funds.

The state auditor conducts annual examinations of all UNC system campuses, but also investigates specific cases as they arise. NCCU's annual audit will begin soon, Nelms said, adding that the university is trying to mend relationships with the state Auditor's Office. They have been strained over time.

"There was a perception that we were less than cooperative," Nelms told trustees. "That's not a good relationship to have with anyone. So one of the things we have made clear ... is that we're going to provide all the information and be as forthcoming as we can. We have nothing to hide."

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More than 200 state employees rallied Tuesday for higher pay raises than are in the legislative budget proposals.

State employees are pushing for 3 percent raises, or $1,100, whichever is more, plus one-time $1,000 bonuses.

The budget proposal has 2.75 percent or $1,100 raises for state employees.

The higher base pay raises would cost an additional $8 million over what's budgeted, according to State Employees Association of North Carolina executive director Dana Cope, and the bonuses would cost between $20 million and $25 million.

The 3 percent raises would bring state employees' raises in line with those proposed for teachers. "Why do we want to split off teachers and state employees?" Cope asked.

After the rally, state employees hoped to make their case face-to-face with legislators. But it doesn't seem as if the employees will get the raises they want.

Senate Majority Leader Tony Rand and state Sen. Linda Garrou, two chief budget negotiators, said neither they nor House leaders have budged from the pay raises included in their respective spending plans.

"North Carolina's providing more for their employees than other states across the Southeast," Garrou said.

Pamela Thorpe, a health care technician at Central Prison, said state employees need meaningful pay raises. Thorpe, who lives in Garner, said her family struggles to make ends meet even though her husband works two jobs.

"There are times I didn't have money to make it to work," she said. "The gas is too high."

Rep. Ty Harrell, a Raleigh Democrat, drew cheers when he spoke in favor of collective bargaining.

SEANC is pushing a bill that would allow collective bargaining for public employees and another that would shift control of the state pension fund away from the state treasurer and to an independent board of trustees.