Southcoast offers implantable device as an alternative to long-term blood thinners

The Watchman Device is a new option for patients with non-valvular atrial fibrillation that has been shown to reduce patients’ risk of stroke.

NEW BEDFORD, MASS. – Southcoast Health announced recently that it is just the third hospital in New England to offer a surgical implant that will allow certain atrial fibrillation patients to stop taking blood-thinning medications that are currently used to prevent stroke.

The newly approved Watchman Left Atrial Appendage Closure (LAAC) Device, from Boston Scientific, reduces the risk of stroke in atrial fibrillation (AFib) patients by preventing the heart from producing blood clots. A heart with AFib beats irregularly and as a result can produce clots, which is why doctors prescribe blood-thinning drugs such as Coumadin or Warfarin.

“Patients who undergo a procedure to implant Watchman have a much lower risk of major strokes related to bleeding and also had significantly lower mortality at long-term follow up when compared to Coumadin therapy for stroke reduction with atrial fibrillation,” said Dr. Nitesh Sood, electrophysiologist at Southcoast Health.

The procedure will benefit patients with non-valvular AFib who prefer a non-drug alternative to blood thinners. They can include individuals who take part in sports or other activities that carry the risk of injury and thus excessive bleeding.

Lahey Hospital & Medical Center in Burlington, MA, and Catholic Medical Center in Manchester, NH, are the only other hospitals in New England to offer the treatment.

“The big advantage is if the procedure goes well, you have the ability of getting someone off blood thinners and reducing their risk of stroke,” said DR. ADAM SALTMAN, cardiologist at Southcoast Health.

Implanting the Watchman Device is a one-time, minimally-invasive procedure that usually lasts about an hour. Following the procedure, patients typically stay in the hospital for 24 hours.

The device was approved by the FDA in March, but has been available internationally since 2009. As of March, more than 10,000 patients worldwide had been implanted with the device. The approval was based on a clinical trial program that included more than 2,400 patients. The studies showed the device reduced the risk of stroke. A meta-analysis of the randomized studies found patients who received the device had reductions in hemorrhagic stroke, disabling stroke and cardiovascular death compared with the warfarin group.

Aurora Pop-Vicas, MD: flu shots prevent hospitalizations in elderly

PAWTUCKET – New research authored by AURORA POP-VICAS, MD, an infectious disease physician at Memorial Hospital, in conjunction with a research team from Brown University’s Health Policy Department, reinforces the importance of vaccinations in the elderly to prevent flu and related hospitalization.

The authors studied Medicare claims data from more than 1 million nursing home residents in the United States.

Their retrospective cohort study “Evaluating the Effect of Influenza Vaccination on Nursing Home Residents’ Morbidity and Mortality,” was published recently in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.

“Influenza causes almost 40,000 deaths each year, mostly among the elderly. Those who live in nursing homes are especially vulnerable because of the natural weakening of the immune system due to the aging process, other health issues, and living in close institutional quarters,” explains Dr. Pop-Vicas.

“What we found was that even in years when the vaccine match was insufficient, influenza vaccination was an important primary prevention strategy for nursing home residents,” Dr. Pop-Vicas says. “This is in contrast with recent literature suggesting that there are limited or no benefits to the elderly from influenza vaccination.”