Medical groups say 90 treatments often not needed

By Charles Elmore

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No feeding tubes for advanced dementia patients. Fewer Pap smears for women. No automatic CT scans for kids with minor head injuries.

They’re all on an expanded annual list of 90 procedures to question or avoid from 17 doctor groups.

The “Choosing Wisely” list released today tries to a push the conversation between doctors and patients on ways to avoid tests or treatments that might not be needed, or even do harm.

The approach is part of a broader trend to find greater efficiency and cost savings in health care, but it must compete against real-world pressures to reassure worried families, stay in business and guard against the risk somebody could sue later.

Doctors who may agree with the concept of reducing unnecessary treatment must also face families concerned about a child who fell and hit her head, said Andrew Larson, a doctor in Lake Worth and president of the Palm Beach County Medical Society.

“If somebody hits their head hard enough to show up at the emergency room, I’d be hard pressed not to go ahead and order the scan,” Larson said. “It’s a five-minute procedure.”

He thinks such recommendations can spur healthy discussion but “I doubt it’s going to change practices in the ER,” he said. “I think most are going to err on the side of caution.”

Some recommendations meet with approval by area specialists. The one against feeding tubes for advanced dementia patients, for example, is supported by scientific literature, said Joseph Ouslander, professor and senior associate dean at Florida Atlantic University’s College of Medicine in Boca Raton.

Such patients may have trouble swallowing, and it is often an emotional topic for families, he said. But problems with the tubes themselves — such as blockages or removal by a patient — often lead to hospitalization.
“It looks like the risks of the tubes outweigh the benefits for most people,” said Ouslander, who said his own mother faces some of the health issues involved.

After months of review, the recommendations were developed by medical specialty societies ranging from the American Academy of Family Physicians to the Society of Thoracic Surgeons. A Consumer Reports survey found 72 percent of consumers who received the annual Choosing Wisely information said it taught them new information, prompted them to ask more questions of doctors or changed their opinions.

The organizations represent more than 350,000 doctors.

“Millions of Americans are increasingly realizing that when it comes to health care, more is not necessarily better,” said Christine K. Cassel, president and CEO of the American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation in Philadelphia, which leads the Choosing Wisely program. “Through these lists of tests and procedures, we hope to encourage conversations between physicians and patients about what care they truly need.”