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PICTURE AVAILABLE: <http://www.rit.edu/news/pics/RITa.jpg>

New app helps victims of domestic violence in the privacy of their doctors' office
Pilot testing underway in Rochester, N.Y.

Primary care practices in Rochester, N.Y., are pilot testing an app that screens patients for domestic violence and makes actionable recommendations for victims and their doctors.

A team of researchers and advocates at Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Rochester Medical Center and Resolve of Greater Rochester (RESOLVE) developed the software program.

“Family care practitioners are often the first place victims of domestic violence turn for help,” said Allison O’Malley, RESOLVE CEO. “Intimate-partner violence (IPV) is a complex issue with many negative health implications, and physicians need to know what to do when patients disclose abuse or when their symptoms raise concern.”

Participating physicians will offer the app to patients when domestic-violence screening suggests a risk or if abuse is disclosed during an office visit. The app uses an avatar named “RITa®” to assess a patient’s mental health and physical safety. The app is installed on local iPads kept at the medical practices. O’Malley provides protocols for administering the app and for patient follow-up.

Intimate partner violence is a widespread public health issue that affects one in four women, one in six men and one in two LGBTQ persons in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

O’Malley recognized the need for standardized digital IPV screening and teamed up with Caroline Easton, professor in RIT’s School of Behavioral Health Sciences, and Nicole Trabold, a National Research Award Fellow in the University of Rochester Medical Center Department of Psychiatry.

“Patient centered innovations like RITa® can help meet the physical and mental health needs of victims of violence,” said Trabold, who will join Easton in RIT’s College of Health Sciences and Technology in July.

The interactive avatar asks 30 validated questions to assess a victims’ status and make recommendations to the patients and their physicians. The avatar also teaches victims about relationship dynamics and how living with an abusive or violent partner can impact their health.

“RITa® is the first application of a ‘female’ avatar to screen for IPV among victims,” Easton said. “RITa® illustrates how we can combine advancements in science and technology with art and design to make a real impact in our community and provide safety for those at risk for serious harm or injury.”

RITa® evolved from Easton’s therapeutic model of care that identifies and treats addiction and anger as underlying causes of family, domestic and intimate partner violence. Easton’s team translated her alternative treatment approach into the cell phone apps RITch® and RITchie® to screen and treat adult and young adult male offenders. These virtual coaches are used in conjunction with cognitive behavioral therapy, to model coping skills for reducing and eliminating alcohol and substance abuse, managing aggression.

Easton and an RIT student team, led by Steve Maier, lecturer in RIT’s School of Interactive Games and Media, customized RITa to interface with victims of abuse. RESOLVE supported student work on the project with a \$15,000 grant from Greater Rochester Health Foundation. O’Malley and Trabold contributed intellectual content and input on the avatar’s navigational flow.

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About Resolve of Greater Rochester:

For 20 years, RESOLVE, a privately funded, 501c3 nonprofit organization, has been empowering people and communities to break the cycle of domestic violence. We develop and deliver innovative, community-centered solutions enabling every woman to thrive and realize her full potential. Founded on an inherent and compassionate belief in people, RESOLVE brings women and men together to create communities that value equality, dignity and respect.

www.resolve-roc.org

About Caroline Easton:

Caroline Easton is a professor in RIT's College of Health Sciences and Technology School of Behavioral Health Sciences. Her research ties addiction and substance abuse to domestic/intimate partner- and family violence. Her treatment model has been adopted by clinicians in the United States, England and the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria, Australia. Following the Newton, Conn., school shootings, the Connecticut General Assembly Public Health Committee asked Easton to identify common causes of violence and develop prevention strategies for pilot projects. In the report, *Addressing Family Violence in Connecticut: Strategies, Tactics and Policies*, Easton called for intimate partner violence reform and evidence-based treatment methods grounded in science and theory.

About Nicole Trabold:

Nicole Trabold is a social work practitioner, educator and health-systems researcher who is finishing a National Research Service Award Fellowship at the University of the Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry. She will join RIT's College of Health Sciences and Technology in the upcoming academic year.