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# A Continuum of Interfaces to Engage Surgical Staff in Efficient Collaboration

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## Abstract

Large hospital surgical suites must combine high quality of care with an efficient management of operations. However, the diversity of procedures, staff, and patients present important challenges for staff collaboration. The complexity of flows between tasks and places, such as interconnections between pre-operation, post-operation and intensive care units, led previous research to address these issues separately using checklists, scheduling, or specialized human-computer interfaces. Approaches to treat the surgical suite as a whole entity have not been explored yet. Here, we build upon a cyber-physical system comprising an electronic whiteboard and different sensors tracking the status of operating rooms to design a continuum of mobile and fixed, shared computer interfaces. The interfaces disseminate the information through different locations and devices and allow for its manipulation in order to foster appropriate collaboration on unforeseen events and decisions. We present our design rationale process, involving the different surgical suite users and stakeholders and report on the architecture of the system.

## Keywords

Hospital; cyber-physical system; surgical suite; collaboration; surgical flow; perioperative activity; awareness; information mobility.

## Introduction

Improving patient care quality is the main displayed motive of hospitals' computer systems, while important underlying reasons of successful stories depend on an efficient management of operations in terms of security, safety, costs, and revenue.

Considering the evolution of the Electronic Health Record (EHR) industry, Epic Company has an 80% market share [1] in the US. Key successes of the EHR are its capability to interconnect all the data of hospital systems and to serve as a collaborative tool between all the stakeholders. The EHR rigorously tracks cost, revenue, and patient care. The Epic software is a hospital information system, including the EHRs.

As revenues from Operating Rooms (OR) represent about 50% of large hospitals' income [2-3], improving capacity by bringing a better management of the surgical flow benefits on all tables. However, designing systems to foster staff collaboration in this environment is challenging due to the heterogeneity of situations, patients, staff, and procedures. Many projects were carried out in this field to study staff collaboration and its support [4-6], but approaches to treat the surgical suite as a whole entity have not been explored yet.

Our hypothesis is that a successful Human Computer System to manage surgical flow must provide a continuum of interactive devices in order to engage all the users in sharing information and efficiently coordinating patient care within the surgical suites. Surgeons and Anesthesiologists are very mobile, and the surgical suite is interconnected with the pre-operation, OR, post-operation, and Intensive Care Unit (ICU) systems. Providing the right information at the right moment to the right person without delay or overload and letting him/her enter the interaction continuum to improve quality of care is the next frontier.

We present a study and a solution built upon a cyber-physical system, comprising an electronic whiteboard and multiple sensors tracking the ORs' status, with a continuum of mobile and fixed, shared computer interfaces. The interfaces' purpose is to foster an appropriate collaboration on unforeseen events and decisions. The system

1 combines a theoretical counterpart that is a stochastic mathematical model of surgical flow using an Agent-  
2 Based Model (ABM) like structure with social network background to simulate the daily clinical activity and  
3 take into account human behaviors [7].

4 Few cyber-physical system architectures have been offered for healthcare so far [8-9]. Only some examples of  
5 mobile technologies [10] are reported to be needed by the staff [11-12], or design-methods suggestions [13], or  
6 *in-OR* systems [14] have been reported but without a holistic integration of the different parts of the surgical  
7 suite – pre-operation, ORs, post-operation, ICUs, etc. Several issues result from this, an example of which is  
8 reported by Amir et al. [15] where the lack of communication means, including the whole care team and even  
9 for patients’ families, happens most of all during transition phases. Transition phases occur numerous times in  
10 the surgical suite, including staff shifts and discussions with the family. Further, research directions and  
11 challenges involved in building MCPS (Medical Cyber-Physical Systems) are extensively discussed and  
12 described as by Lee et al. [8]. High Assurance Software, Interoperability, Context-Awareness, Autonomy,  
13 Security and Privacy and Certifiability are the most highlighted ones. Our study focus on improving the surgical  
14 team Context-Awareness.  
15

16  
17 An analogy between civil aviation and hospital health management has finely been highlighted by Kapur et al.,  
18 Toff and Helmreich [16-18]. The members of our team come from both worlds and a focus of our research is to  
19 find out if the industry organization of civil aviation, its culture of safety and long-standing experience on  
20 designing human-computer interfaces, can be transferred to hospitals’ surgical suite management systems. Civil  
21 aviation studies for Air Traffic Control (ATC) present shared specificities with the hospital surgical suite, such  
22 as safety/security management, cost-efficiency, emergency situations, and high team workload.  
23

24 This paper summarizes our design method, involving the different surgical users and stakeholders, and report on  
25 the architecture of the system.  
26

## 27 **Method**

28  
29 The approach used is described starting from groundwork with multiple hospitals then switching to a local  
30 analysis of activity.  
31

### 32 **The Surgical Suite terms**

33  
34 A *surgical suite* (Fig. 1) is a “group of one or more ORs and adjunct facilities, such as a sterile storage area,  
35 scrub room, and recovery” [19]. The surgical suite is comprised of numerous equipment: to carry information  
36 (paper notes, medical records), to communicate (whiteboards, phone calls, text messages, emails), computers to  
37 access the hospital system and patient information. Surgical suites are dedicated to surgical patients’ care and  
38 are overloaded with information, short deadlines (emergencies) and missing spatial organization.  
39

40 The *surgical suite staff* is comprised of nurses, surgeons, anesthesiologists, board runners (who are also nurses),  
41 technicians, cleaning crew, and transporters.  
42

43 *Pre-operation* defines the step within the patient’s journey in the hospital when the patient is getting ready for  
44 surgery, the main actors are the nurses, the surgeons, and the anesthesiologists; *post-operation* defines the step  
45 from the end of the surgery to the moment the patient is back to his/her room or is leaving the hospital. The  
46 main actors are the Nurses.  
47

48 The principle coordination tool within the surgical suite is the *whiteboard* (Fig. 2): this board is the place of all  
49 discussions and contains all the cases scheduled for the day for the surgical suite. It supports exchanges and  
50 reflections about the scheduling activity and is edited with latest updates/re-scheduling actions about the  
51 different cases. For instance: Patient A has been sent for surgery, now he is currently in room #10 etc.; or  
52 procedure updates, for instance: Patient B procedure has started.  
53

### 54 **Groundwork**

55  
56 To build the foundation of our work, we interviewed (via phone calls or in-person meetings) 103 stakeholders  
57 who are involved with surgical suites in Texas, New Jersey, North Carolina, New York, Illinois and California  
58 and France in the fields of: medical/healthcare (hospital administrators, surgeons, anesthesiologists, nurses),  
59  
60

1 accounting, consulting and engineering services. Of the 103 stakeholders, 27 worked at hospitals, 69 in industry  
2 with hospitals as customers, 5 for universities, 1 for the NSF, and 1 was a prior-to-surgery patient.

3 The purpose of this was to understand the bottlenecks within hospital management of surgical suites from  
4 multiple perspectives. Three main considerations for a desirable outcome came up:

- 5 1. Shortening the “turnover time” between cases to optimize OR schedule plans and to minimize staff  
6 overtime.
- 7 2. Streamlining the operation and improving awareness, safety, and efficiency during a surgery case.
- 8 3. Improving patient satisfaction and outcome due to an optimized time of the operation.

9 This groundwork set up our qualitative analysis about the needs within the surgical suite. We then quantified  
10 these delays.

### 11 **Analysis of a local activity in the surgical suite**

12 We studied a surgical suite of our home institution, since there is a correlation between the best electronic health  
13 support and the fact that it is designed according to the particularities of a place [20]. We conducted contextual  
14 inquiries and observations of the surgical suite [21], including photographic captures of the whiteboard [22], to  
15 better understand the surgical suite activity at our home institution. The practical results of these studies were  
16 the observations of significant and systematic reporting of the events occurring inside the OR onto the  
17 whiteboard – for instance, the average delay of 15 minutes per OR for the event “patient entry in the OR”; the  
18 fact that information sharing could be improved; and the more data that could be acquired if the whiteboard was  
19 electronic.

### 20 **Rationales**

21 As opposed to civil aviation traffic, there is no satisfying digital system in the hospital to track, in real-time, the  
22 progression of each surgery and map the overall state and traffic of a large surgical suite. The accumulation of  
23 delays in the surgical suite is critical because it leads to more case cancellations, stress for the staff and loss of  
24 revenue for the hospital which affects mostly the patients, and surgical suite awareness and communication  
25 problems are the main source of these delays – most of all on the turnover task [7, 21]. Each surgical suite has  
26 its own culture and rules, including social ones, and we must be careful to directly involve stakeholders in any  
27 system design process for such environment.

28 By taking in account the groundwork and environment analysis, our hypothesis is that by building a continuum  
29 of interfaces, using an iterative design process, and involving the surgical staff in participatory design sessions  
30 at every step will engage better collaboration awareness among the surgical suite, and therefore help reduce  
31 these delays (Fig. 3).

### 32 **The system**

#### 33 **Architecture and computational framework of the system**

34 This work is carried out within the development of a cyber-infrastructure consisting of three elements [21] (Fig.  
35 4):

- 36 1. SmartOR [21-25].
- 37 2. A continuum of interfaces described in the next sections.
- 38 3. A mathematical model of the surgical suite patient flow [7][26].

39 The SmartOR is a set of non-invasive sensors installed inside the OR and capture the surgery status – patient  
40 in/out of the OR, patient intubation/extubation, laparoscopic procedure start/end – and feeds it to the surgical  
41 suite database.

42 The mathematical model is an agent-based representation of the surgical suite organization and surgical staff  
43 collaboration that takes into account human behavior and performance in a complex system approach. The  
44 output of the model helps to understand the accumulation of delays within the surgical suite and to show that

turnover time between surgeries, as defined as one of the most critical performance indicators, is the most nonlinear functional output of the system.

The stakeholders interact with this architecture by using the different interfaces as input terminals and visualization tools of the surgical suite state.

We present each step of that construction for each of the next parts of this section:

1. An ATC analogy.
2. *Background*: the context.
3. *Actual*: the current activity of the staff.
4. *New*: The activity that the new interfaces offer.

### **OR status and the “flight status”**

*Background*: To manage the surgical flow, we need to acquire the real-time OR state.

*Actual*: Typically, OR state is acquired by physically going into the OR, or by calling the surgical staff inside the room. Because of the geographic distribution of the suite that may contain several dozen rooms, or the latency of phone communication and the interruptions generated, this does not represent the optimum method.

*New*: We designed a SmartOR setup based on a minimalist set of robust sensors (Fig. 5) that wirelessly communicates the OR state autonomously. This information can be posted in real time at the entrance of the OR with a simple tablet display, thereby removing the need to enter the room, which also has potential impact on airborne infection [27]. An alternative solution provided by the industry is to place RFID tags on each member of the staff but the acceptance of this technology by personnel is fairly low [28]. On the contrary, our solution targets events.

### **Mapping the surgical suite state or “building a radar” for the Board Runner**

*Background*: The board runner is a nurse who is responsible for scheduling the cases within a surgical suite and optimizing the surgical flow.

*Actual*: The board runner receives information from Epic (the hospital system) and from nurses, surgeons, residents, etc. who manually enter information into Epic. The information appears on displays as lists.

*New*: We designed the control room interface to display the SmartOR information as a map that symbolically shows the surgical suite’s status and allows the user to enter a request of information to the staff (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). We verified with the board runners that a symbolic map display saves time and improves visual performance in obtaining the information at the surgical suite level [21]. The system can also be installed in the OR manager’s office in order to prevent interruption of his/her daily duties.

### **A shared board – OnBoard, to cadence surgical flow or the “control tower” of the surgical staff**

*Background*: The board runner and his/her team uses the traditional whiteboard to schedule/re-schedule the surgical cases throughout the day based on emergencies, requests, surgery requirements, delays, etc.

*Actual*: The board runner goes to the whiteboard (Fig. 2) to think about the best solution to optimize the flow, taking into account the unforeseen events cited above. He/She takes an eraser and a marker, and erases/writes new information so that the whole staff will be aware of it. Updates about OR status are sometimes manually input by nurses or other staff on the whiteboard. Anesthesiologists use the whiteboard for their own scheduling. Above the whiteboard are Epic screens, helping the staff with the schedule. The problem is that these screens are often shutdown or are displaying information that is not as up-to-date as it is on the whiteboard. Some usability problems can be found on these screens like the fact that many important elements are too small to read.

The whiteboard provides a natural and robust teamwork interface to manipulate individual OR states and prioritizes events the same way air-controllers manipulate paper strips for flights [29-30].

1 *New:* OnBoard is an electronic whiteboard whose purpose is to replace the traditional whiteboard of the surgical  
2 suite. The information displayed on OnBoard comes from the Epic database that is manually entered the night  
3 before. To transition smoothly from the traditional whiteboard of Fig. 2 to the interactive OnBoard, we used a  
4 multitouch display of approximately the same dimensions as the whiteboard (84 inches) that can hang on the  
5 wall the same way (Fig. 8) After a rigorous testing protocol, we decided to use a 4K InGlass™ technology  
6 multitouch surface that provides for our users the best cost/performance ratio. OnBoard is a shared and large  
7 multi-user surface that allows the surgical suite staff to monitor the patient flow in the surgical suite. Most  
8 importantly the information entered by the staff on the interactive whiteboard can be tracked by the cyber-  
9 physical system.

### 10 **Engaging the social network of staff “just on time”**

11 *Background:* Epic contains the schedule planned the night before along with the EHR. It shows the status of the  
12 surgical suite as the board runner/nurses make their inputs throughout the day. These inputs are often delayed  
13 due to the high workload and critical activities. This information is available on Epic servers.

14 *Actual:* When the staff needs to exchange information and collaborate about case scheduling, they can go to the  
15 whiteboard and talk with the Board Runner or alternatively call/text message him/her.

16 *New:* We designed the mobile phone app (Fig. 9) to bring OnBoard information to the staff, out of the surgical  
17 suite. The mobile app is composed of a main page containing the list of all the cases the user is following. When  
18 the user touches a case he/she opens a detailed information page about the selected case.

19 The overall expansion of the system across the space and time built incrementally with these four steps is  
20 complex but needs to appear to the end user community as ubiquitous and natural as possible.

### 21 **Conclusion and Discussion**

22 Our approach was to treat the problem with an intricate adaptive system view [7, 31] and to encompass all the  
23 scales of communication and interaction with a continuum of interactions for avoiding gaps and broken links in  
24 the surgical work-flow. Our construction used a bottom-up approach by first acquiring OR statuses, mapping  
25 OR suite activity to make it visible, organizing a common place to engage collaboration that we called OnBoard,  
26 and finally overcoming space limitation by linking people via mobile devices. We learned from our user  
27 community how to balance the design of this continuum to circulate information between individual staff while  
28 preserving moment and place of collaboration. This continuum is tangible thanks to a cyber-infrastructure that is  
29 kept as little intrusive as possible to the hospital management system. Our iterative design cycle is adaptive as  
30 the hospital community continues to evolve with new technology and medical devices.

31 Further, our work highlighted three goals from the surgical suite community: shortening the “turnover time”;  
32 streamlining the operation by improving awareness, safety and efficiency; improving patient satisfaction and  
33 outcome.

34 With the continuum of interfaces presented in this article, the staff may have the tools to both preserve moments  
35 – dedicated to one patient – and save time in terms of scheduling, and to preserve common places for  
36 coordination and movement through the hospital space. According to the location of the interfaces, OR  
37 door/control room/surgical suite information hall/personal mobile phones, different notifications or  
38 visualizations must be taken into account. The importance of a notification can be different according to the  
39 moment: the board will notify the staff in a more invasive way that an OR is not ready to receive a patient right  
40 before this patient should actually enter the OR rather than an hour before. While we have sufficient user  
41 feedback and measurements [21-24] to claim that our system has the potential to improve the first two goals, we  
42 still have to incorporate the patient in our study. Patients’ and families’ engagement is a transformative force in  
43 the health industry, and insurance policy in the United States now has a component strictly dependent upon  
44 patient satisfaction that will keep growing in importance in the near future [32].

45 Short-term future work will consist of a full-scale clinical study of the system, i.e. OnBoard installed in the same  
46 suite as the SmartOR sensors and connected to the EHR system. We will then evaluate user experience with  
47

1 OnBoard. Long-term future work encompasses the expansion of the continuum of interactions to reach the  
2 patient and the family members who need to manage anxiety and be prepared.

### 3 **Acknowledgments**

4 We would like to thank the Dunn and OPC OR crew at Houston Methodist Hospital who actively participated in  
5 this study.  
6

### 7 **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

8 After being reviewed by the Director of Office of Research Protections of the Houston Methodist Research  
9 Institute, this project was declared to not require either IRB or ARAF review.  
10

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13 Hospital Operating Room Grant No.1657550.  
14

### 15 **Conflict of interest**

16 Author Juliette Rambourg declares that she has no conflict of interest. Author H el ene Gaspard-Boulinc declares  
17 that she has no conflict of interest. Author St ephane Conversy declares that he has no conflict of interest. Author  
18 Marc Garbey declares that he has no conflict of interest.  
19

### 20 **Ethical Approval**

21 All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards  
22 of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later  
23 amendments or comparable ethical standards.  
24

### 25 **Informed consent**

26 Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.  
27

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## 17 Figures Captions

18 **Fig 1** Surgical suite example of architecture. The physical organization of the different rooms makes the sharing of  
19 information difficult by nature, as the distance does not favor communication. On this image we can also see that the case  
20 scheduling traditional whiteboard is centralized most of the time and is located nearby the control room.

21 **Fig 2** Surgical suite whiteboard. As the central element of communication and exchanges about the case scheduling activity  
22 among the surgical staff, it contains all the scheduling of the day (written in black) as well as additional info such as  
23 equipment and staff allocations. We can also see on the image the additional updates made in color (red, sometimes blue), to  
24 alert on specific matters, such as an emergency case entering the flow.

25 **Fig 3** Design methods for the continuum expansion. Through participatory and iterative design with the end-users, we  
26 progressively developed component of the continuum of interfaces to fill the gap created by the distances within the surgical  
27 suite (Operating Room door to the Control Room, a staff location to the Control Room etc.).

28 **Fig 4** Representation of the cyber-infrastructure. The SmartOR sensors collect OR state data and save it in the database (a).  
29 The different interfaces (OnBoard, Mobile phone application and Control Room interface) can then dispatch it through the  
30 surgical suite (b, c, d). OnBoard is also considered a sensor as what is written on it or the modifications made on it can be  
31 also saved in the database (b). The mathematical model runs data to create a better understanding of the flow and potentially  
32 send alerts/help to re-schedule cases.

33 **Fig 5** Analogy between a radar in civil aviation and for the surgical suite. Just like a flight as a route and a status, we seek to  
34 build the radar of the surgical suite to assess better its status. With more up-to-date data and better collaboration tools, the  
35 staff could anticipate better and reduce stress and delays.

36 **Fig 6:** Analogy between an air traffic controller and a control room board runner. The board runner runs the surgical suite,  
37 he/she constantly has its status in the mind. He/she is responsible for the smooth running of operations. This image shows  
38 how new technology can empower the board runner to monitor the surgical suite more efficiently.

39 **Fig 7** Control room user interface. This prototype shows how a surgical suite map can help the board runner to monitor the  
40 surgical suite status. The map reduces the problem of distance in the surgical suite between the different rooms by giving  
41 with colors a resume of the global status of each rooms, surgeons and patients. We also considered that a board runner could  
42 be interested in looking the surgical suite status of other surgical suites of the hospital, to potentially exchange patients and  
43 improve efficiency.

44 **Fig 8** OnBoard interface. This large multitouch screen is destined to replace the traditional whiteboard. Its layout is built to  
45 copy the traditional whiteboard, and by adding more features. The main power of such an interface compare to the  
46 whiteboard is the traceability of changes.

47 **Fig 9** Main layout of the mobile phone app. This image shows the main layout of the mobile phone application: a resume of  
48 the cases that the user can follow on his/her phone anywhere with an access to the hospital intranet. This allow us to dispatch  
49 information in a wider area than only the surgical suite if needed.

Fig 1 Surgical suite example of architecture. The physical organization of the different rooms makes the sharing of information difficult by nature, as the distance does not

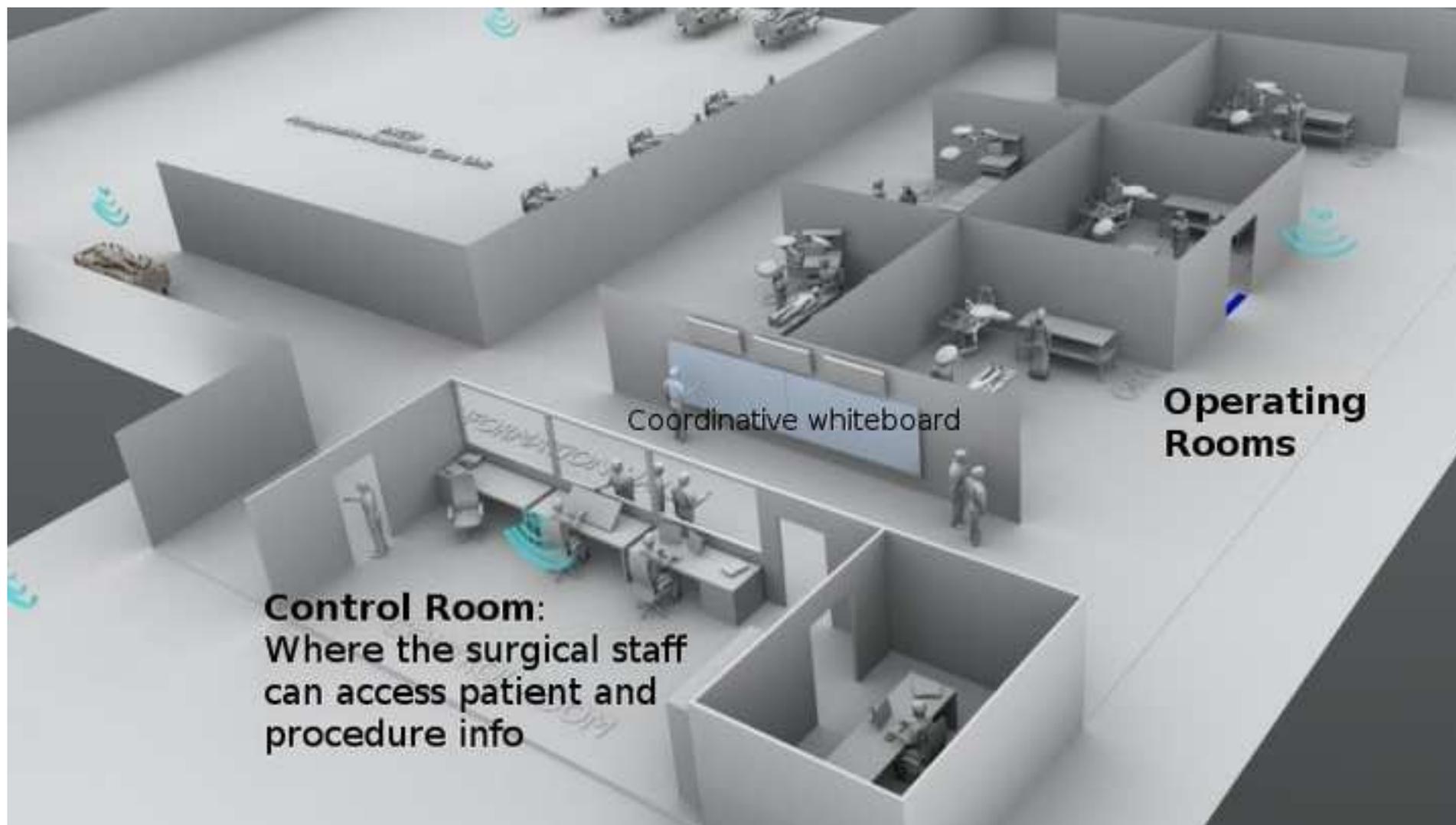


Fig 2 Surgical suite whiteboard. As the central element of communication and exchanges about the case scheduling activity among the surgical staff, it contains all

[Click here to download Figure Fig2.jpg](#)

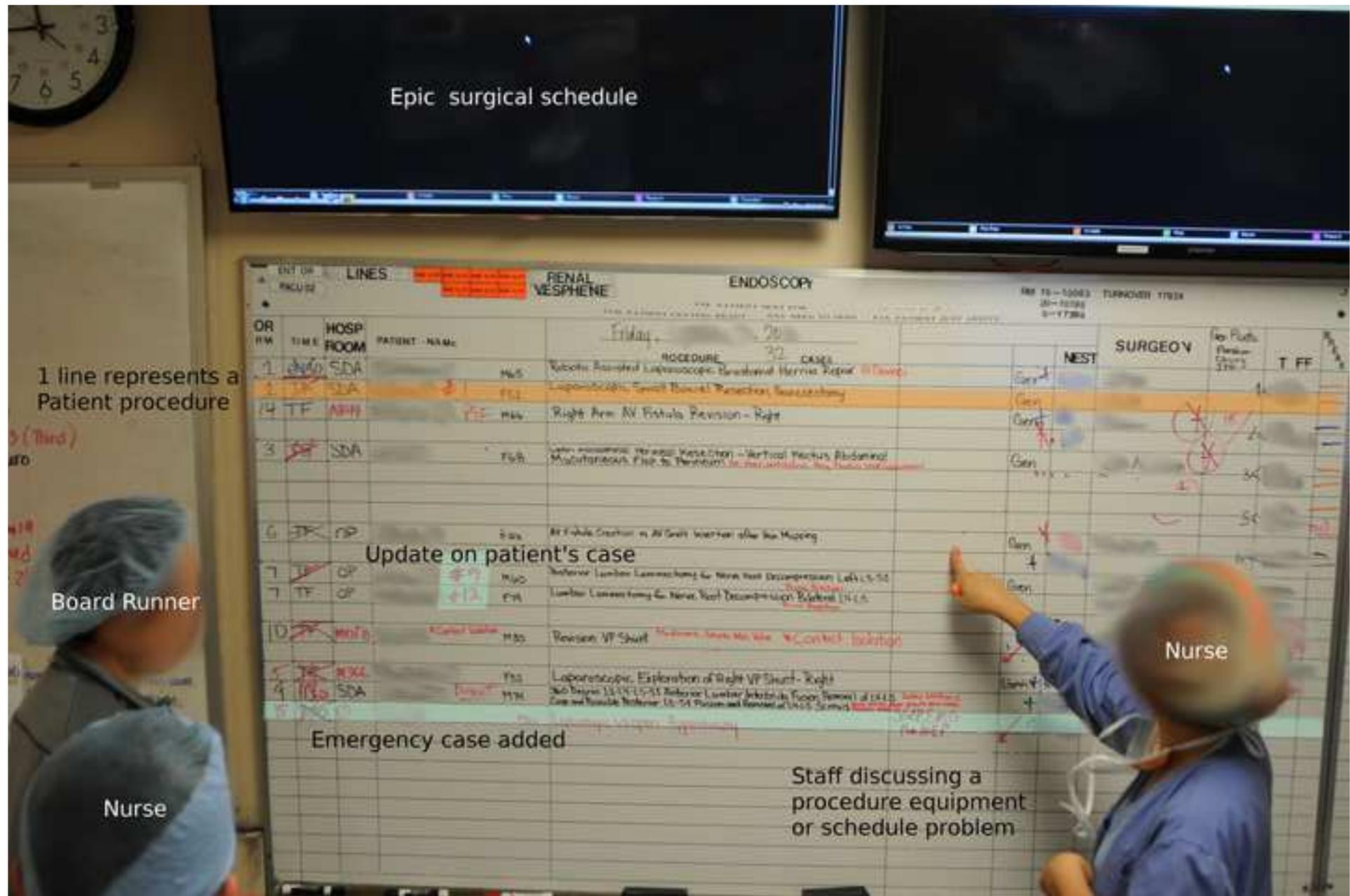


Fig 3 Design methods for the continuum expansion. Through participatory and iterative design with the end-users, we progressively developed component of the continuum of

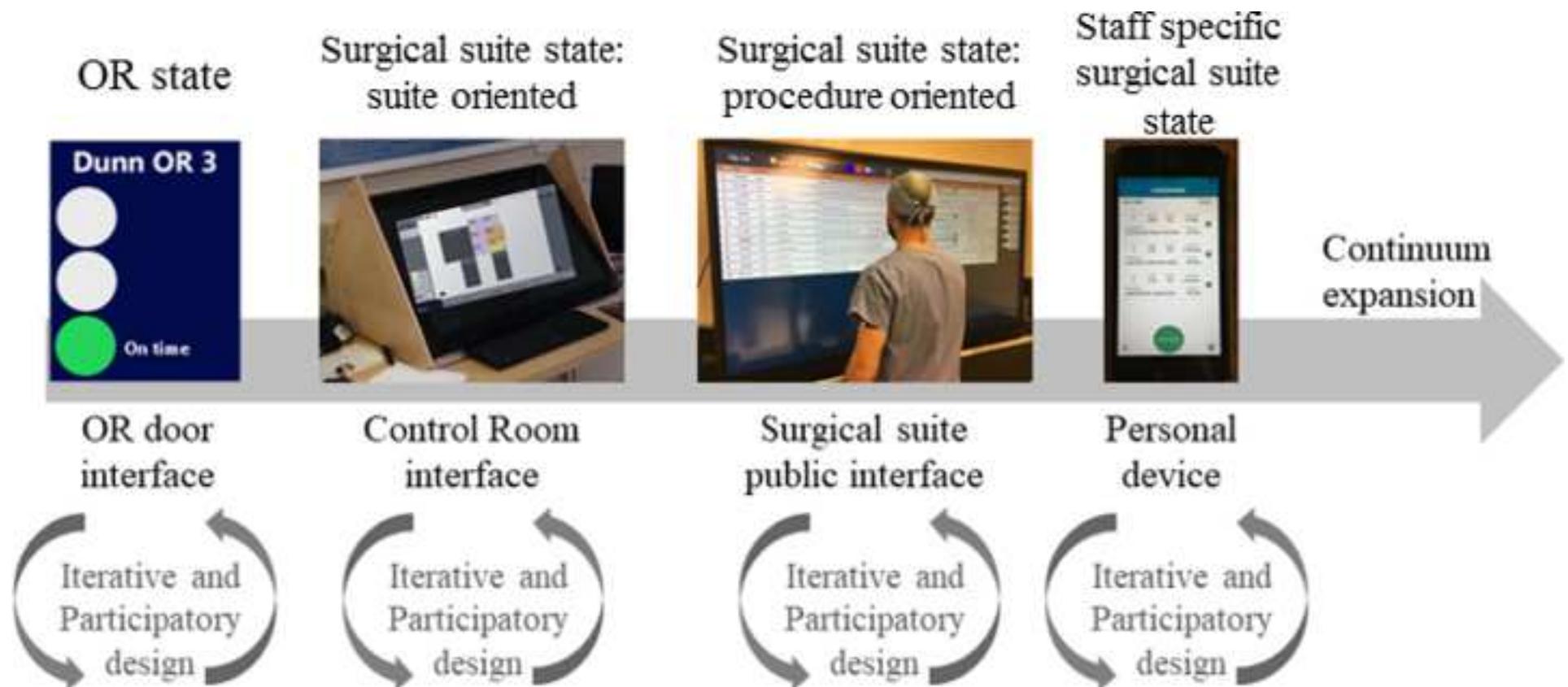


Fig 4 Representation of the cyber-infrastructure. The SmartOR sensors collect OR state data and save it in the database (a). The different interfaces can then dispatch it

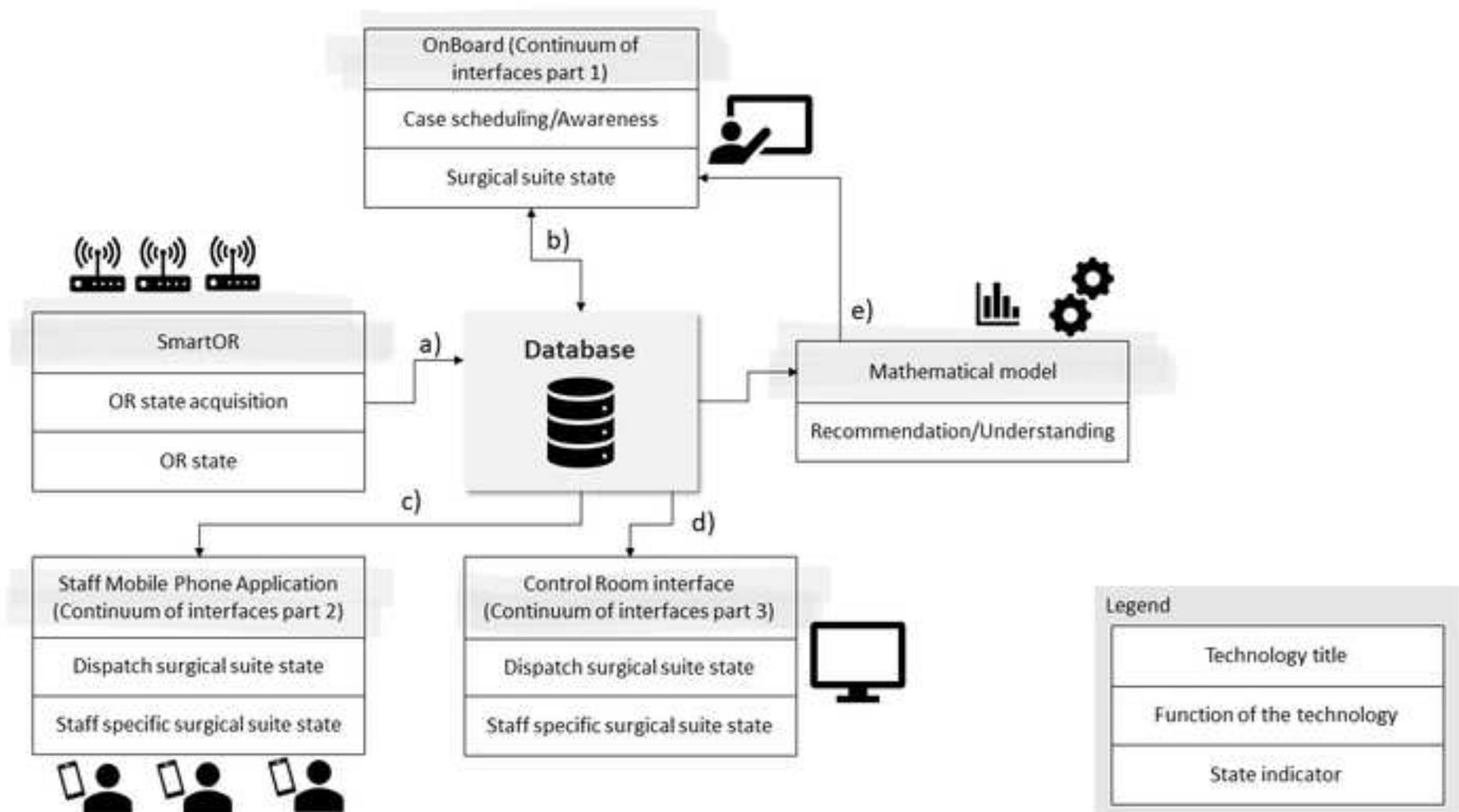


Fig 5 Analogy between a radar in civil aviation and for the surgical suite. Just like a flight as a route and a status, we seek to build the radar of the surgical suite to assess

## CIVIL AVIATION



*Location*  
*Altitude*  
*Weather*  
...



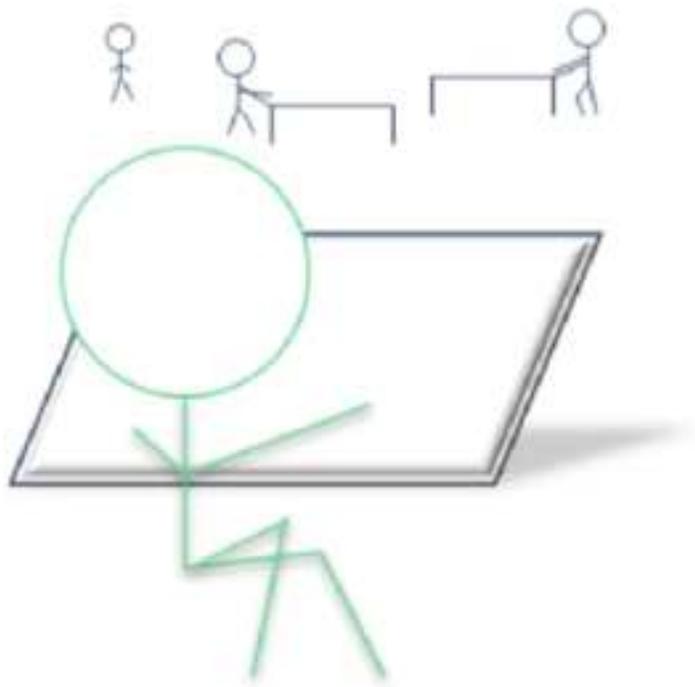
A radar to follow a surgery in an operating room, as air traffic controllers follow planes on their radar

## SURGERY



*Patient in OR*  
*Intubation*  
*Extubation*  
...

Fig 6 Analogy between an air traffic controller and a control room board runner. The board runner runs the surgical suite, he/she constantly has its status in the mind.



**Monitoring  
nurse**



**Air traffic  
controller**

Fig 7 Control room user interface. This prototype shows how a surgical suite map can help the board runner to monitor the surgical suite status. The map reduces the

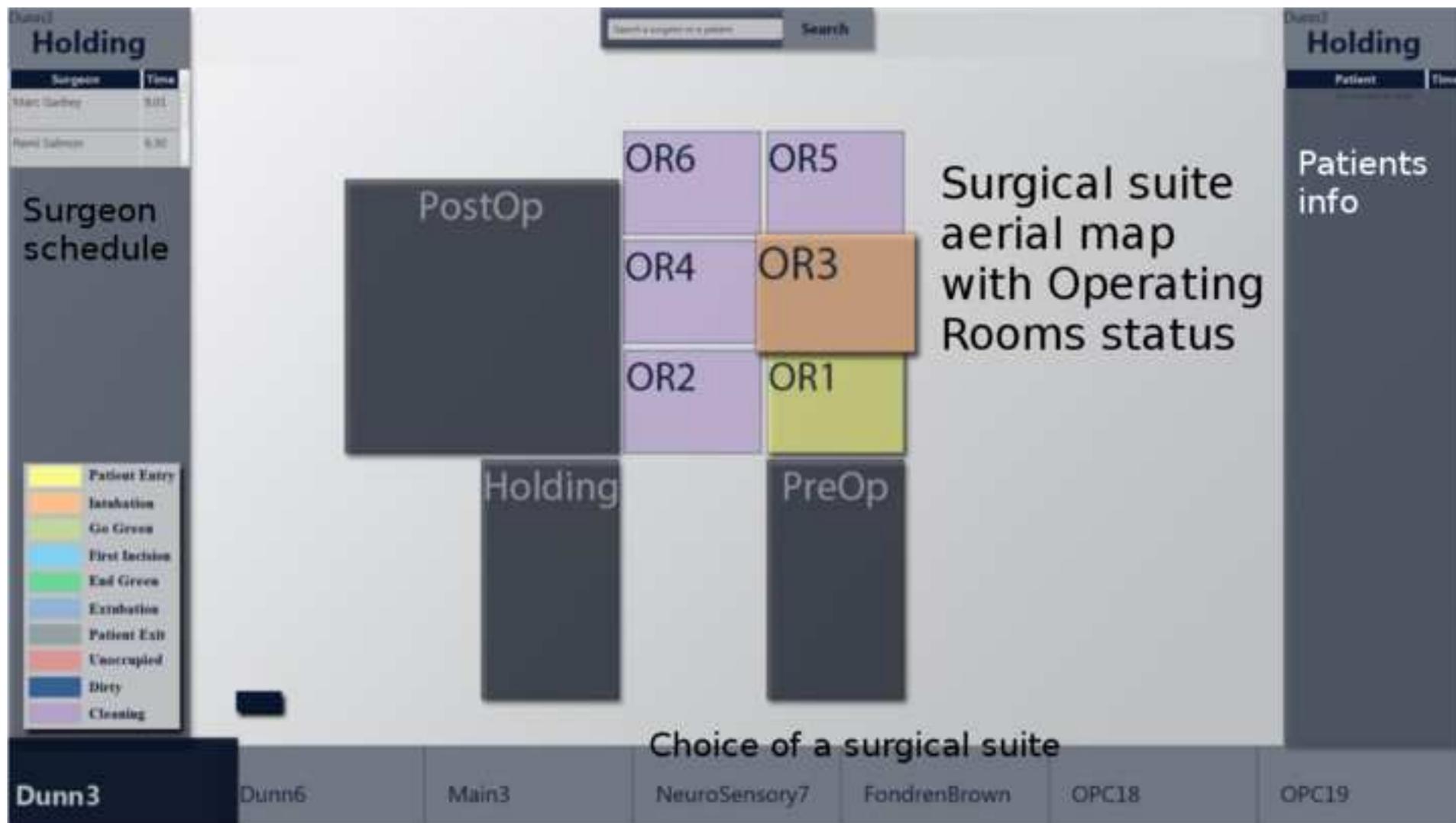


Fig 8 OnBoard interface. This large multitouch screen is destined to replace the traditional whiteboard. Its layout is built to copy the traditional whiteboard, and by

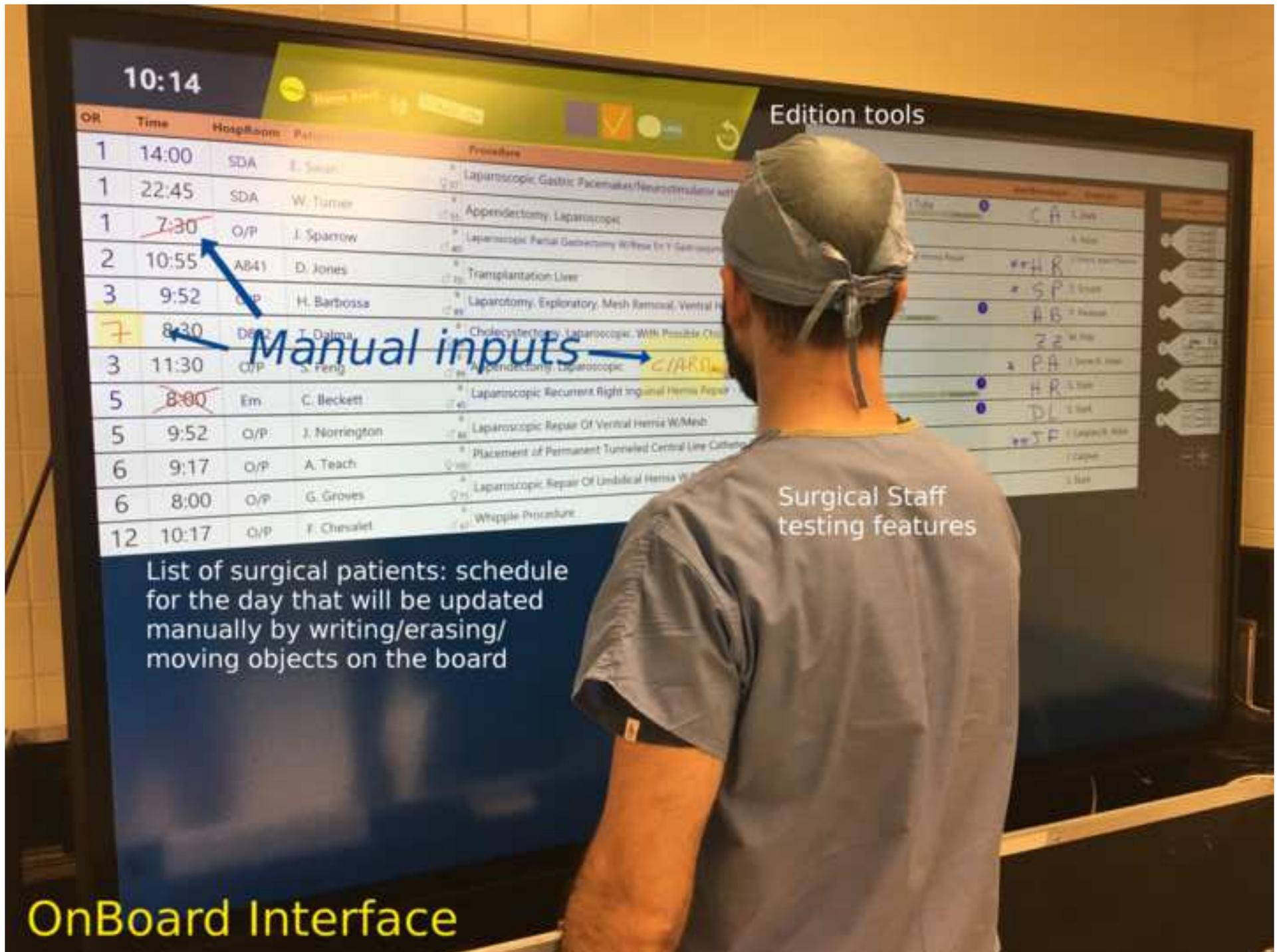
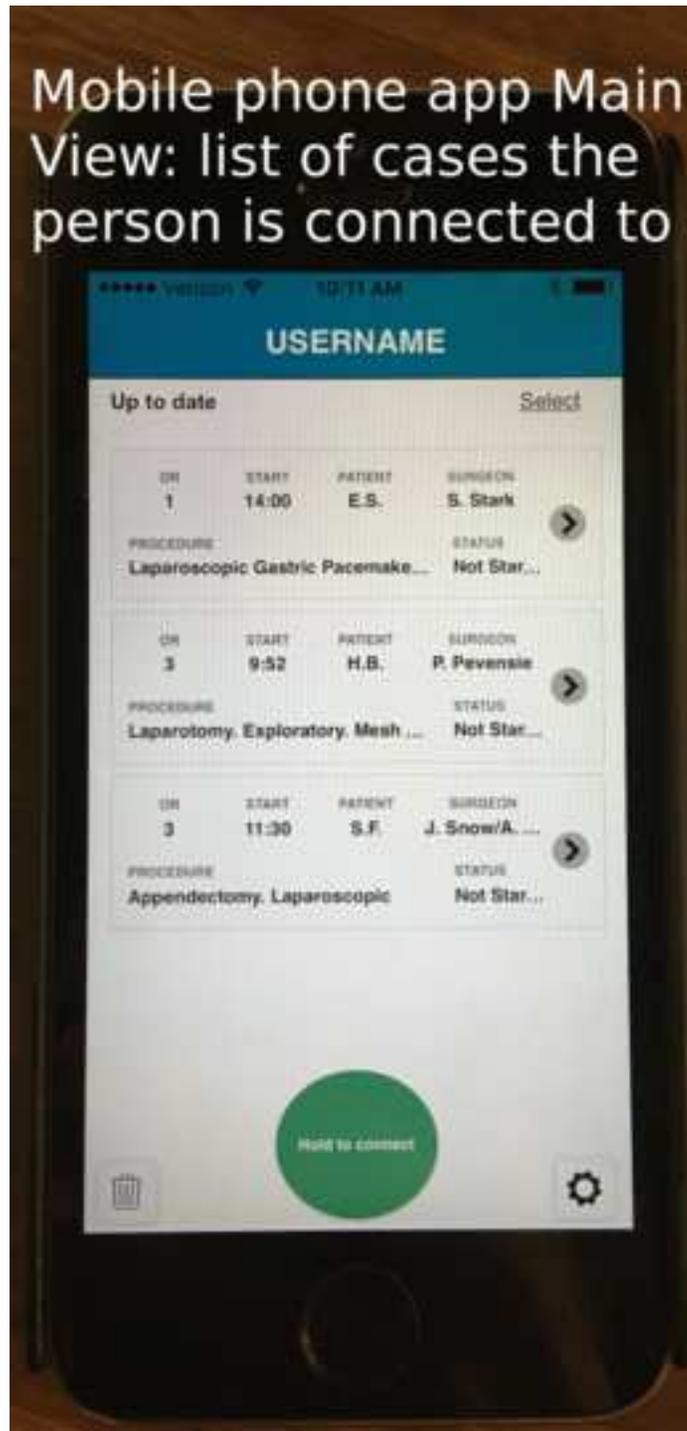


Fig 9 Main layout of the mobile phone app. This image shows the main layout of the mobile phone application: a resume of the cases that the user can follow on his/her

Mobile phone app Main View: list of cases the person is connected to



View when the user view the modification of a case

