I fully expect that this technology will soon be adapted for medical education purposes. For instance, clinical clerks might take the written portion of their anesthesia examination in this way, under the proctorship of the departmental secretary. If several universities were to coordinate their efforts, the size of the question pool could be made quite large and all questions could be scientifically validated - something rarely done in current anesthesia clerkship examinations. Universities could also see how their students do relative to other universities and take corrective actions where deficiencies are identified.

The possibilities offered by web technology in education is truly striking. For more insights into what one can expect in the future, take a look at some of the efforts also underway on the web at medschool.com, freetutorials.com, med2learn.com, click2learn.com, blackboard.com and worldwidelearn.com.

D. John Doyle MD PhD FRCPC
Toronto, Ontario

[2] Software Review

StarOffice Release 5.2
http://www.sun.com/software/star/staroffice/
StarOffice™ 5.2 suite is a "free, full-featured, integrated, interoperable office suite" from Sun Microsystems offering "rich, easy-to-use office productivity tools in a unified desktop environment". StarOffice can be downloaded without charge for the Windows environment and other platforms (e.g., Linux). It takes up much less hard-disk space than Microsoft Office, and, being free, is certainly much cheaper.

According to Sun Microsystems, the office suite "provides complete functionality including word processing, spreadsheet, presentation graphics, drawing and photo editing, database, one-click HTML creation and editing, email, browser, internet newsgroup software, schedule and calendar, clip art, templates and more". Comparable in functionality to Microsoft Office, its user interface is intuitive and straightforward. Indeed, StarOffice is "interoperable" with Microsoft Office file formats such as ".doc", ".ppt", and "xls". StarOffice "includes an import/export feature that provides seamless interoperability with Microsoft Office" so that one can easily open and edit existing Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint files in StarOffice.

One can also save StarOffice documents, spreadsheets, and presentations as Microsoft Office files.

A companion site at http://www.staroffice.com offers a user support discussion group, a developer support discussion group as well as information on the many books available to learn about StarOffice. Also available at this site are "portal services" such as free e-mail addresses of the form you@staroffice.com, as well as free web-based storage space for your documents.

A useful list of frequently asked questions is available at http://www.sun.com/software/star/staroffice/5.2/faqs-general.html

For technical types, the source code for StarOffice software is available at OpenOffice.org. Sun has also made the StarOffice APIs and XML file formats available as well, "in an effort to drive standardization across office productivity suites". This means that developers around the world can even modify StarOffice "to best suit their needs, whether to improve their own products, build new value-added products on top of the StarOffice suite, improve existing technology in StarOffice software, or contribute new StarOffice components to the open source community". This move opens up the market to unlimited possibilities for innovation that simply are not possible with closed systems such as Microsoft Office.

I had no trouble downloading the 77 MB installation file and setting up the suite. Still, the file size is daunting if you do not have a high-speed Internet connection, so some users might prefer to order the CD version from Sun. I found the program to be intuitive and easy to use but with some unexpected differences. For instance, unlike Microsoft Office, where users typically use Word or PowerPoint as standalone applications, StarOffice uses an integrated design. That is, from the StarOffice desktop, one creates different types of documents by selecting the document type desired from a pull-down menu.

While version 5.2 of StarOffice includes more than 200 fixes and enhancements over the previous release, there are still some restrictions and problems, particularly in effortlessly exchanging StarOffice documents with Microsoft Office. (For more details, read the review at: http://www.networkcomputing.com/unix-world/1118/1118uw.html).

Despite these limitations, StarOffice 5.2 is a solid piece of software at a price that is hard to argue with.

D. John Doyle MD PhD FRCPC
Toronto, Ontario

Erratum

In the article entitled: "Separation of omphalopagus conjoined twins using combined caudal epidural - general anesthesia" published in the May 2001 issue (pages 478–82), the second author's name should have read: David D. Frankville.