



By Damon Adams, AMNews staff. June 14, 2004.

Patients like seeing familiar face on Dr. Robot

Eight in 10 patients say robo-doc would increase accessibility to physicians.

The patients have spoken, and the news is good for that mechanical contraption doing hospital rounds. They like robot doctor -- in some cases, more than a real doctor.

A new study at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore found that half of hospitalized patients preferred seeing their own physician via remote-control robot to being visited by a different doctor. Dr. Robot, also known as robo-doc, is an armless machine used by an off-site physician to see and talk with a patient through a mounted camera and screen that shows the doctor's face.

The finding is part of a Johns Hopkins study testing the robot doc as a way to link physicians and patients. Researchers said it is meant to supplement interactions between doctors and patients, not to replace the physicians.

"They're still visiting with me [via robot]. I still get cookies once in a while, and the robot gets a can of WD-40," said Louis Kavoussi, MD, the study's lead author and professor of urology at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

Johns Hopkins began testing the robot last year. Thirty hospital patients were picked to receive visits from the robot, which is used to answer questions and check on how patients are healing and feeling.

Half of the patients in the study said "telerounding" should become regular practice for postoperative patient management. Eight in 10 patients said robo-doc would increase access to their physician. About three in four patients said using the robot would allow physicians to provide them with more medical information.

"It's replacing your presence, not your knowledge or cognitive function," said Dr. Kavoussi, a member of the scientific advisory board for InTouch Health, which makes the robot. Johns Hopkins is managing the project in accordance with its conflict-of-interest policies.

Dr. Kavoussi said young and old patients are embracing the new technology.

"Part of it is the novelty factor. They see this thing roll into their room," he said. "If the robot passes them, they say, 'What about me?'"