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R2-D2 WITH AN M.D.: Operated by remote control, a robot can allow patients to have a virtual visit with their doctor when the doctor cannot be physically present.

Now making the rounds: robo-doc

By Jane E. Allen *Times Staff Writer*

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Sometimes a robotic doctor may be just as good as - or better than - the real thing.

Dr. Louis R. Kavoussi, vice chairman of urology at Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, has found that a robot operated by remote control can provide most of the follow-up care surgical patients normally would get from their own doctor (except for the hands-on examination).

The virtual visit improves physician access to patients, not just on weekends or at

night when the doctor is off duty, but also when the doctor is on vacation or elsewhere in the hospital, Kavoussi said. All the doctor needs is highspeed computer access.

And patients seen by the robo-doc as it makes its robo-rounds seem just as satisfied with the virtual visit as they are with being seen in person by Kavoussi or his partner.

"There's a wow factor," said Kavoussi. "When this thing rolls into the room, no matter how bad the patient is feeling, they immediately perk up because it is a novelty." So far, about 50 patients have been "seen" by the robo-doc; 30 were randomly selected to be surveyed two weeks after their discharge.

The robo-doc displays the doctor's face on a flat color video screen. The doctor, via computer, directs the robot's video camera to pan, tilt and zoom to inspect surgical sites up close. Meanwhile, the patient hears the doctor's real voice as they discuss recovery and other concerns. Kavoussi presented the results May 8 and 9 at the American Urologic Assn. meeting in San Francisco.