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Defying Reputation, Doctors Tap Tech

■ By VITA REED

Robo-Doc is making the rounds at Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo.

Developed by Goleta-based InTouch Health Inc., Robo-Doc roams the corridors of the hospital's surgical-trauma wing, directed by Dr. John Shaver, a general surgeon on staff.

The robot stands about 5 feet tall, has a flat video screen and cameras that serve as its eyes and ears. Shaver, operating a joystick, uses the robot to check on patients from his office via the Internet.

Shaver's face appears on the screen and interacts with patients via a real-time video setup.

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"It's an adjunct to medicine. It is not meant to be a substitute for your own going and seeing, the personal attention you (give) to the patient," Shaver said.

Instead, he said, it increases the doctor's ability to treat hospitalized patients, including simultaneous conferencing with patients and nurses.

Robo-Doc is one advance that hospitals and doctors, despite their reputation for being slow to change, have adopted in a bid to make their practices more efficient.

The main challenge for the Robo-Doc program, according to Slater, was getting it through various hospital committees, including ones covering its nursing practice and infections.

InTouch leases its robots to Mission, part of the Memorial Health Services Inc. chain, and 14 other hospitals and nursing homes in the U.S. for about \$3,000 a month. The cost includes computer software, training and tech-



Head case: nurse walks "Dr. Shaver" down the corridor at Mission Hospital. The robot provides personal assistance; software is updated about once a month.

In fact, doctors are adopting technology at a faster rate than consumers, according to a recent report from Forrester Research.

Forrester found that 40% of doctors own a personal digital assistant, versus 8% for all consumers; 77% of physicians use the Internet in the office, compared to 41% of consumers.

Memorial also is using technology via its Palm Doc project, which began in 2001 and arms doctors with Internet-based personal digital assistant devices.

Palm Docs, which resemble other personal digital assistants, carry Memorial's best practice guidelines, patient census numbers and staff rosters. Doctors also can code a procedure or an entry into a patient's record.

Memorial eventually wants its doctors to use the devices to enter prescriptions.

About 50 of Memorial's 218 active staff physicians at its Anaheim hospital are participating in Palm Doc, said Dr. Rakesh Bhola, a

pulmonary and internal medicine physician on staff at Anaheim Memorial Medical Center.

Studies from the Institute of Medicine and the Leapfrog Group, a San Francisco-based business coalition, influenced the development of the Palm Doc project, according to Bhola.

As for getting resistant doctors to adapt, Bhola said: "What you want to do (with a new device) is go out and show the physician how easy it is to use and how it can impact patient care and quality."

But Bhola acknowledged that finances are a factor that limits the use of technology. The personal assistant devices used in Anaheim Memorial's Palm Doc project cost about \$300, down from \$500 a few years ago.

Technology adoption is boosting the fortunes of companies such as Quality Systems Inc., a medical software company based in Irvine.

Quality's NextGen Healthcare Information Systems Inc. unit, which is based in suburban Philadelphia, installs and services electronic medical records and practice management software. NextGen helps medical offices dump paper files and obsolete patient tracking systems, replacing them with computers and software.

Locally, users of NextGen include Family Care Centers Inc., a group medical practice affiliated with Newport Beach's Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian. Family Care has six locations in OC.

Family Care uses NextGen to help cut down on overhead and improve productivity, said Dr. Neil Neimark, a family practitioner and practice member. The practice has access to NextGen through its contract with Hoag Practice Management Inc., a Hoag Hospital unit that provides management services to associated physicians and medical groups.

"We're a pretty young practice, so we wanted to be one of the first on board, rather than one of the last to convert," Neimark said. "It's

an inevitable next step for medicine."

Family Care's NextGen data include patient charts, billing information, coding, general preventative care alerts and prescription data, Neimark said.

The federal Institute of Medicine and other institutions have touted automated prescribing as a way to cut back on potentially deadly medication errors.

"There's no fear of misreading a (signature) on a prescription. It's very clearly typed out," Neimark said of automated prescribing.

There are hiccups in moving to more automated systems, Neimark said. It took his practice some three to six months to transfer patient records and other information to the computer, he said.

Technology also can be used to fight prescription fraud, Neimark said. He told a story about getting a call at his home from an individual wanting a refill for Vicodin, a potentially addictive painkiller.

"I looked at the chart (through the Internet) and there was no such prescription—it was a fraud," Neimark said. "I was able to tell the pharmacy immediately that they should call the police and try to have this person arrested."

Quality counts a market value of \$295 million at recent check. For the 12 months through March 31, Quality reported a 30% jump in sales to \$71 million, versus a year earlier.

The software maker's recent deal with a unit of Bio-Imaging Technologies Inc. of Newtown, Pa., represents another step along the tech path.

The pact calls for Quality to license Bio-Imaging technology, which lets patients keep personal health data on their personal computers and exchange data with their doctors and other healthcare providers. ■