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Robotic doctor makes the rounds at Oakwood

By Sheri Hall / The Detroit News

DEARBORN — Nurses at Oakwood Hospital’s emergency room are calling the newest addition to their staff “Rosie” after the faithful, robotic maid in the futuristic Jetsons cartoon.

The comparison isn’t far from the truth.

Standing about 5 feet tall, the hospital’s new “Rounding Robots” have computer screens for heads and real-time video cameras for eyes and ears. Doctors can operate them by remote control to examine patients from another building or even another country.

The 200-pound robot won’t replace human health care workers, but will allow specialists or a patient’s personal doctor to examine them from another location — enhancing convenience for physicians and giving patients quicker access to doctors who aren’t in the hospital. Oakwood expects to start using two of the robots in the hospital’s emergency and surgical departments within two weeks.

“It’s a way to communicate in a time of need and inaccessibility,” said Dr. Samer Salka, an Oakwood interventional cardiologist and one of the first doctors in Michigan to use the new technology. “At 2 a.m. when I need to see an EKG or talk to a patient, I should be able to do that right from home. I can make a diagnosis right away and then come in (to the hospital) if I need to.”

The robots come from the start-up company InTouch Health, based in Goleta, Calif. So far, the company has placed 15 “Rounding Robots” in hospitals and nursing homes nationwide.

InTouch leases the robots for \$3,000 a month, which includes computer software, training and technical support. The robots are not for sale because the software is updated about once a month, said Timothy Wright, InTouch’s vice president of marketing.

Each robot is controlled by a joystick and uses wireless, broadband technology and the Internet to communicate with the doctor’s computer.

Patients visited by the robots will hear their doctor’s voice and see their face on the robot’s computer screen in real time. The doctor also can see and hear the patient.

The robot can rotate its head and body separately and can travel up to 2 mph. A safety mechanism uses 24 infrared warning sensors to prevent the robot from bumping into people and walls.

“We’re hitting just about every form of new technology out there,” InTouch’s Wright said.

Two Oakwood doctors — Salka and Dr. Tom Siegel, the chief of surgery — have computers set up to operate the robots from their homes and offices in a pilot program.

Now, the health system just needs to find out whether patients are willing to use the robots. A recent survey at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore found patients enjoy the mechanical medical workers. Still, Oakwood plans to introduce the new technology slowly and give patients the option to see their doctors in the flesh.

“The way it’s presented will be the key, but eventually they’ll all get used to it,” said Connie McGinnis, the emergency room’s clinical manager.

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John T. Greilick / The Detroit News

Nurse Connie McGinnis chats with Dr. Samer Salka, an Oakwood cardiologist, via The Companion robot. The robot allows doctors to speak to patients from a distance.

CyberSurvey

Robot doc

Five-foot-tall robots incorporating video cameras are now being used in some hospitals, allowing doctors to examine and communicate with patients from another location. As a patient, would you be amenable to that technology if your doctor wasn't on hand?

Yes

No

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