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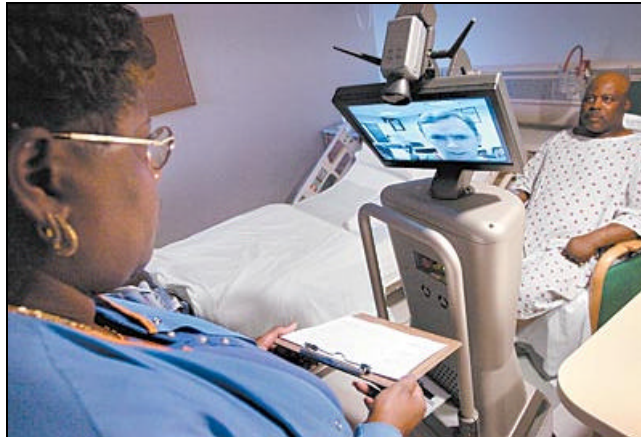
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Robotic doc tested at hospital



Rene Etta Trafton, a nurse, uses a "Rounding Robot" to show Dr. Robert Given data on patient Charles Moore during a demonstration at Sentara Norfolk General Hospital Thursday.

STEPHEN M. KATZ/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

By KATRICE HARDY , The Virginian-Pilot
© April 30, 2004

NORFOLK - The newest aide to make rounds at Sentara Norfolk General Hospital \has a computer screen for a head, hidden wheels for feet, and a camera to see and hear patients.

The "Rounding Robot" is one of the latest experiments in trying advanced technologies to streamline hospital care.

Physicians with Devine-Tidewater Urology have been using the robot as a stand-in after some patients' surgeries. Logging onto the Internet from their homes or offices, the doctors use joysticks to steer the 5-foot, 200-plus-pound machine into patients' rooms.

There the robot becomes a go-between. Doctors and patients can talk with each other through the machine, and the video images the robot transmits help physicians examine surgical wounds. After a robot-aided checkup is completed, a doctor can even order a patient's discharge.

By putting physicians two places at once, patients get quicker access to their doctors, said Devine-Tidewater Urology's Dr. Michael Fabrizio .

He and others believe the robot can also help alleviate the staffing shortages that have plagued the health-care industry in recent years by allowing medical practitioners to be more efficient.

Some detractors have said such technologies remove the personal touch that some patients need.

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POLL

Do you agree with using robots as go-betweens for patients and doctors?

But Fabrizio believes robots have enough promise that it was worth finding out how his patients would feel about the machines.

Yes
 No
 Undecided

So far, he has gotten more than a dozen patients to agree to participate in tests of the robot.

[View results.](#)

The Rounding Robot, three of them actually, came to Norfolk about three weeks ago .

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It is not the first time that Devine-Tidewater Urology or Sentara Norfolk General has experimented with such a high-tech creature.



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About two years ago, Fabrizio began working with ZEUS, a three-armed robot that helped the urologist perform surgeries. Fabrizio specializes in prostate and kidney surgeries.

Norfolk General is now waiting on an updated version of ZEUS that has won approval from the Food and Drug Administration to help perform cardiac surgeries.

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The current robot study is being conducted by Norfolk General, Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore and the University of California at Davis.

Their goal is to entice about 70 patients undergoing noncritical surgeries at their facilities to take part. Afterward , the hospitals, physicians and patients will evaluate the machine, made by InTouch Health of Santa Barbara, Calif.

The study is expected to take at least six months.

The technology is not meant to replace doctors, nurses or other medical practitioners. said Timothy C. Wright, vice president for marketing for InTouch Health.

"This is simply to extend someone," Wright said. "It's to allow them to be at multiple places at one time."

At least one local patient said the Rounding Robot lived up to its billing.

Last month, Barbara A. Vick donated a kidney to her 28-year-old daughter.

Shortly before surgery at Norfolk General, her physician asked if she would participate in the robot study.

"They told me the robot would let me see my doctor after surgery, " said Vick, 58, who lives in Portsmouth. "I didn't think it could hurt. You really don't get to see your doctor often, anyway."

When Vick woke up from surgery and sat up in bed, she saw her image on the head of the robot. Also in the computer screen was the image of her doctor. They talked, and she was shown a picture of her surgery.

"It was just like talking to him in person, " she said. "Anytime I wanted to talk to him I could, and I could ask him anything I wanted."

When her relatives visited, they, too thought the robot was fabulous, Vick said. "I wouldn't trust a robot to give me an IV, but to talk to my doctor, it's great," she said. "You definitely get more access to your doctor."

Louis Kavoussi, a urologist at Johns Hopkins, said no matter how badly patients feel, seeing the robots makes them smile and sometimes laugh. He has been surprised by how well-received the machines seem to be.

Ultimately, Fabrizio said, the key to the robot's success in the health industry will be to improve quality of care.

"It's certainly an exciting tool for patients and physicians," he said.

Reach Katrice Hardy at 222-5857 or at katrice.franklin@pilotonline.com

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