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## Hopkins Hospital tests 'Dr. Robot'

Communication: A new device provides a sort of remote-control video-phone for physicians and patients.

By **Dennis O'Brien**  
**Sun Staff**

Originally published August 25, 2003

It's not intended to replace doctors and nurses.

But the 200-pound robot - controlled by a joystick and looking like a futuristic vacuum cleaner - is turning out to be extremely popular at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

The robot works like a remote-controlled video camera, rolling into patient rooms and taking pictures and sound that allow for televised conversations.

Referred to as "Dr. Robot" by Hopkins staffers, the device is being tested as a tool to help check on patients more often and over longer distances. If a hospitalized patient complains about sudden pain, the doctor might be able to check from home or from out of town.

Dr. Louis R. Kavoussi, the Hopkins urology professor who is testing the robot, said surveys of 20 patients conducted last spring showed they were more satisfied with the care they received if the robot was used. He is not sure why.

"It doesn't intuitively make sense," said Kavoussi, who is on the advisory board for InTouch Health Inc., the California firm that is marketing the robot. "But there could be a lot of reasons for it."

He said patients treated by doctors using the robot might feel they are

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getting special care or getting more time with doctors who would otherwise be rushing through daily hospital rounds.

The robot stands about 5 feet tall and is controlled by a doctor, who watches through a video screen as he guides the machine from room to room with a joystick. Patients and doctors peer into lenses and see each other on television screens.

As it rolls along at about the pace of a slow walk, the robot invariably draws stares and questions from patients.

One of the more memorable questions came from Elizabeth Mintz, a retired police officer who had a kidney removed three weeks ago. She wanted to know whether the robot had the same durability under fire as the one used by her former employer, the Prince George's County Police Department.

"I did ask if it was bulletproof, but it was more of a joke than anything else," Mintz said in an interview. "I know the Police Department's was bulletproof."

The robot is currently being marketed to nursing homes, and the tests at Hopkins are the first at any hospital, Kavoussi said.

The hospital is paying \$2,500 a month to rent it.

From his first-floor office, Kavoussi focuses his camera on the hospital's tiled floor as he maneuvers the robot toward a patient's room seven stories up, occasionally bumping into doorways and other obstructions.

Once the robot is in the patient's room, he questions the patient about how she feels on her first morning after surgery to relieve chronic pelvic pain.

"I could see how kids would love it. Teen-agers would be fascinated by it," the patient, Kim Ferguson of Boydton, Va., said in a later interview.

But Ferguson's husband, who was in his wife's room as the robot entered, said Kavoussi has to improve his driving.

"It backed up and almost ran over my foot," said a smiling Barry Ferguson.

Kavoussi is working on his driving. He is also conducting a more comprehensive study of 50 patients, which he intends to publish.

Kavoussi compared the robot's popularity to that of automated teller machines, which banks began using in the 1980s. While many customers initially complained about the lack of human contact, ATMs quickly gained acceptance.

"People thought there would be no personal contact, but it just made things easier," he said.


Other doctors say the robot could help them get around on a busy day or even check on patients from home. Talking with a patient over the telephone helps make a diagnosis, they say, but that doesn't always cut it. Face-to-face contact can be crucial.

"There's no substitute for meeting someone or seeing someone face to face, but there are times when that's not an option because of distance or time constraints," said Dr. Thomas Jarrett, chief of the endourology division at Hopkins, who is working with Kavoussi on the robot tests. "It's not going to replace the human being, but it will allow more access."

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