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Local News

Retirement complex greets Rosie robot

'Companion' starts work at Otterbein retirement community

By Dan Cox
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LEBANON | A robot has invaded the Otterbein Retirement Living Community, and the nurses have named her Rosie.

Rosie, named after the robo-maid on *The Jetsons* cartoon show, is one of four robots being tested around the country as a way to deal with impending nursing home staff shortages.

As more baby boomers age and retire, they're expected to fill retirement communities and nursing homes.

According to a May Department of Health and Human Services report, the number of people requiring long-term care services will grow 200 percent in the next 50 years.

Creators of Rosie, officially known as "the Companion," said the robot will essentially allow nurses and other retirement community officials to be at more than one place at a time.

The robot is controlled by someone at a base station, who connects to the robot through a high-speed Internet connection.

The person controlling the robot moves it with a regular home computer and a joystick.

A camera and microphone are connected to the robot and on the base station, so the operator can see and

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speak to people.

"If a nurse is needed at Otterbein's northern facility to consult on something or to simply interact with residents, she can use the Companion instead of driving four hours," said Donald Gilmore, chief executive officer of Otterbein Homes.

The operator's face is transmitted to a screen on the robot, making it seem more lifelike.

Instead of wheels, the robot moves on balls, so it can turn 360 degrees as well as move from side to side.

Residents at Otterbein have reacted well to Rosie, officials said.

"Their initial reaction was one of amusement and wonderment," said Sandy Ratliff, assistant vice president of clinical operation. "They acted as though they were talking to a television."

Even the patients with dementia seemed unsurprised by Rosie's presence, she said.

"Of course, Rosie is no comparison to human interaction," Gilmore said. "With Rosie, though, a nurse can provide interaction and consultation from anywhere in the United States."

Yulun Wang, chairman of InTouch Health, which is making the robot, said the robot also is being tested at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, as well as at two retirement communities in California. Wang hopes the robot will be made available on the market in two to three months.

"The staff were the most wary about Rosie," said Rosemary Cicak, executive director of marketing and public relations at Otterbein. "They thought Big Brother was watching. Once they realized this wasn't the case and were able to see how Rosie could help, they became more receptive to it."

Wang said he chose Otterbein as a testing ground for the robot because of Gilmore's reputation as an innovative leader.

"I see this idea expanding," Gilmore said. "I see in a few years, a daughter in New Hampshire is able to jump onto her control station and visit her mother in North Carolina.

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"She would have a presence with her mother, as they talked and moved throughout the building," he said. "The daughter could see her mother's room, the community she lived in and speak with her mother's physicians as the two of them moved around the community. A level of intimacy could be created that wouldn't be there if they just talked on the phone."

Contact Dan Cox at 225-2378.

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