

PLAY TIMES £150,000 FANTASY FOOTBALL

TIMES ONLINE

PRINT THIS ARTICLE

 CLICK HERE TO PRINT

CLOSE WINDOW

August 24, 2003

## Robo-doc has a mechanical bedside manner

TONY ALLEN-MILLS

GLIDING soon to a bedside near you: the cyber-solution to the shortage of hospital doctors.

Scientists have designed a 5ft-tall remote-controlled robot, nicknamed Robo-doc, who can swoop from bed to bed, soothing patients and listening to their symptoms.

The human doctor may be sitting in another clinic miles away, but his face is displayed on the video-screen head of his robotic alter ego.

Robo-doc combines webcams, microphones and speakers enabling the real doctor to communicate with the patient using internet technology. When one consultation is finished, the doctor twiddles a joystick to steer Robo-doc to his next case, who can be monitored without the need for personal visits or a nurse.

Robo-doc, already in use in America, is the brainchild of InTouch Health Inc, a Californian robotics company whose board members include Dr Jonathan Sackier, a former registrar at Hammersmith hospital, London. After his move to America, Sackier became one of the first surgeons in the world to use a remote-controlled robotic arm in a 1993 operation.

"We have an ageing population, increasingly complex medical capabilities, a diminishing number of people providing care and rapidly escalating health costs," said Sackier. "This is true on both sides of the duck pond (Atlantic). The robot enables a more efficient service and extends the reach of the care-giver."

Robo-doc has proved a minor sensation at the Johns Hopkins hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, where, much to the amusement of both patients and doctors, the prototype has been rolling down corridors, visiting patients' rooms and occasionally bumping into doors.

The robot is powered by rechargeable batteries and moves smoothly in any direction on three computer-controlled urethane rollers. It is weighted at the bottom, making it hard to knock over if crashed into by a trolley.

Doctors insist the robots are proving genuinely useful. "We don't have time to run up to the patients' floor every time someone has a problem," said Dr Sam Bhayani of Johns Hopkins. "But Robo-doc can go."

Dr Louis Kavoussi, a colleague, added: "Patients love it. I was surprised how much they enjoy remote video interactions via the robot."

Versions of the robot are being leased for £2,000 a month to several homes for the aged and to long-term health facilities where specialists are able to monitor bed-ridden or immobile patients without having to make long drives to visit them.

Production of the device is still in its infancy, but Tim Wright of InTouch said the company hoped to lease out more than 100 Robo-



THE TIMES  
OF LONDON  
epaper

FREE  
DEMO

docs by the end of next year. There are no immediate plans to send one to Britain, but Sackier said they would be perfect.

"There are no two ways about it," he said. "The United Kingdom is moving towards a devolved health care system. Do you wait for the physician to waste an hour in traffic or does he consult via telemedicine?"