

## **Dr. Robot is on call**

### **Interactive tool can make rounds**

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POWAY – Lying in a bed at Pomerado Hospital's intensive care unit yesterday morning, Phyllis Rodriguez of Ramona looked listless. It was day 12 in the hospital for treatment of pneumonia. Dr. Ben Kanter asked how her night went, if her throat was sore or if she had any problems in the morning. Rodriguez responded with “good,” “no” and with a shake of her head.

It was a typical doctor's visit, except Kanter was sitting behind a laptop one floor above Rodriguez, demonstrating a new technology.

Standing at the door of Rodriguez's room was a 5-foot-5-inch robot wearing Kanter's white coat and stethoscope. Kanter's face was on a screen that doubles as the robot's head.

“It's like talking to a person, really,” said Rodriguez's husband, Jose. “(The doctor) does all the asking, basically.”

Kanter can beam to a patient's bedside from anywhere in the world as long as he has a high-speed Internet connection. Using a joystick and laptop, he can navigate the robot down hospital corridors, rotate it 360 degrees, zoom in on a patient's eyes, X-rays or vital-signs monitor, and hear and speak as if he's there.

The robot isn't a replacement for doctors, Kanter said, but can enhance patient care.

The Palomar Pomerado Health district, which operates Pomerado and Palomar Medical Center in North County, says it's the first in the county to use such an interactive robot to assist doctors.

“I am pretty impressed,” said Dave Woods, 64, of Chula Vista as the robot glided past while Woods waited for his father to finish treatment.

The RP-7 robot that Pomerado demonstrated for the media yesterday is made by InTouch Health, based in Santa Barbara. About 200 are in use in the United States and abroad, according to the company, which wouldn't reveal how much they cost.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune  
Dr. Ben Kanter of Pomerado Hospital demonstrated the RP-7 robot that is controlled by a laptop on a floor above patient Phyllis Rodriguez.

[Photo gallery](#)

The robot is wireless and can operate for eight hours after a two-hour battery charge. The RP-7 won't work in elevators, parking lots or places that don't have wireless Internet access. InTouch monitors the robots online for malfunctions and can detect when they need new batteries or other parts.

Called "remote-presence robots," they are one of the latest approaches to "telemedicine," an emerging field that allows doctors to do their jobs from afar.

UCSD Medical Center has no immediate plans to install such robot doctors, but spokeswoman Leslie Franz said similar types of technology are in use.

"Telemedicine is the future, no doubt, though there are a lot of questions still unanswered," Franz said. ". . . We're building a new medical education building fully equipped with telemedicine capabilities, to teach future medical students to use the technology."

The first-generation RP robot was released in 2002, and Pomerado's is the latest, the seventh generation. Hospitals lease them. Palomar Pomerado has about nine months remaining on its one-year, \$96,000 lease, during which it will evaluate the robot's usefulness. It will be tested next by neurologists in Pomerado's emergency department.

A doctor at Children's Hospital of Orange County has used an RP-7 for the past 18 months to communicate with patients at Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach, both for treatment and to assess their conditions before they are transferred to Children's.

"The doctor can observe the patient, talk to the parents and Hoag doctors, while observing the child," hospital spokeswoman Monica Garcia said. "They make treatment recommendations prior to being transported."

The nursing staff at Pomerado has named the robot Iris because it serves as an additional pair of eyes.

Pomerado uses Iris to check on patients, to accompany nurses on night rounds and for face-to-face chats with patients' family members if the doctor can't be there. A nurse is usually in the patient's room with the robot. A phone attached to it is available if a patient wants privacy.

Palomar Pomerado has six laptops, and one computer station in the intensive care unit at Palomar Medical Center in Escondido, that can control the robot at its Poway hospital. All seven doctors on the district's pulmonary/critical care team will be using it, Kanter said, and others, including obstetricians, have expressed interest.

RP-7s also can be useful at hospitals that don't have specialists on staff. A stroke patient could be quickly evaluated by a neurologist and given clot-busting drugs, Kanter said.

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