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USA studies technology as solution to nursing shortage <<

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By MONIQUE CURET
Staff Reporter from Mobile Register

The University of South Alabama Medical Center is participating in a three-month clinical trial that will explore the use of a robot as a solution to the nationwide nursing shortage, hospital officials announced Monday.

It's the second acute care hospital in the nation -- the first was The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore -- to use this type robot, developed by a California company and dubbed SAM, for South Alabama Medicine, officials said.

Though USA Medical Center is the second to use the robot, it is the first acute care hospital in the nation "to explore the use of remote presence technology to address the national nursing shortage," according to the hospital.

Though it's referred to as a robot, the device's controls are manned by a human. The robot is outfitted so that a video screen mounted like a head displays the image of the health care provider who is using a joystick to operate the device.

Video cameras -- one above the robot's screen and another above the computer screen where the doctor or nurse is situated -- allow health care providers and patients to see one another.

SAM is capable of traveling down hallways and into rooms, pushing open doors and riding in elevators.

The device is an effort to close "the most important distance in medicine -- the 50 feet between the nursing station and the patient's room," said Carl Taylor, the director of the USA Office of Emerging Health Technology.

Carolyn Williams, nurse manager for the hospital's seventh floor, one place where the robot will be used, said that the nurses will evaluate the effectiveness of the robot's role, and they hope the device will increase productivity.

The robot will never replace the nurse at the bedside," Williams said, but it "can save you steps and time."

For instance, on the seventh floor, there are two hallways. One houses rooms 701 to 718, and the other has 719 to 734. Nurses operate from one central station on that floor to serve all of those rooms.

Patient response has been favorable, Williams said, adding that the novelty of the robot lifts people's spirits.

Williams said the nurse population is getting older and retiring, and not as many young people are choosing that profession. It's



necessary to find ways to supplement the current nursing population, she said.

Giving examples of what the robot can help accomplish, Williams said the nurses could use the zoom function on the robot's camera to check an IV site for swelling. Or they could send a nursing assistant into a patient's room to remove the dressing from a wound and could use the robot's camera to zoom in on the wound and check it.

Charlene Roberson, director of leadership services for the Alabama State Nurses Association, said robots are an additional tool to help nurses, but she doesn't see how they can ease the shortage.

The robots will just enable nurses to do what they do in a different way, she said. They don't eliminate the need for humans.

Roberson said, though, that she thinks robots can become an asset to nursing.

The clinical trial is federally funded through a grant from the Office for the Advancement of Telehealth, and patients have to give their consent and sign a release to be involved.

The goal is to find ways the remote presence technology can improve communication between patients and their caregivers, including medically underserved rural areas," according to USA Medical Center.

The robot is being used during physicians' rounds, and eventually may be used in the emergency department, officials said.