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Robo-docs bolster human supply

By Jennifer Harper
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Paging Dr. Kildare, Dr. Welby — and now, Dr. Robot. The old-fashioned bedside manner has gotten a high-tech boost.

Robot doctors are rolling through the halls of several health care facilities around the country, billed as "remote presences" with the potential to bolster the ever-dwindling supply of doctors, nurses and other caregivers.

"This has been a very, very pleasant surprise. We're getting positive reactions which are off the charts," said Michael Chan of In-Touch Health, a California robotics company that crafts the 5-foot-tall, 215-pound "Companion" devices that glide about agreeably on a trio of hidden urethane balls.

"We're not trying to replace a physician or nurse, absolutely not," Mr. Chan said. "But the need for these experts as the population ages and the demand grows will get acute. We're augmenting their ability and leveraging it with technology."

The technology is not in the "Star Trek" realm, but it works. The battery-powered robot features a rotating, movable video-screen "head," an embedded video camera with zoom lens, microphone, speaker and 24 infrared sensors. But it's what's inside that counts.

The robo-doc is connected to a human counterpart through a broadband and wireless network. Wielding a computer-style joystick, monitor and keyboard from another location, a doctor or nurse can see and hear the patient, then make a diagnosis or recommendation — even from hundreds of miles away.

But it's personal. The patient can see who is behind it all: A video camera is trained on the practitioner's face, and the live image is fed onto the robot's front screen.

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The robots serve in pilot projects at long-term health care facilities in California, Ohio and Utah, as well as at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, where they are leased for about \$2,500 a month.

With their long-distance technology, the robots provide a kind of medical consortium. Doctors in San Juan Capistrano, Calif., for example, check up on patients in Salt Lake City.

"Patients love it. I was very surprised how much our patients enjoy remote video interactions via the robot," noted Dr. Louis Kavoussi of John Hopkins.

The robot, he said, is the "ears, mouth and eyes" of the real doctor.

"Many health care facilities and long-term care communities lack the resources to maintain a staff of all the medical specialists needed," Dr. Kavoussi said. "The robot has the potential to fill this vacuum."

Indeed, the number of people who will need long-term health care will grow by 200 percent in the next few decades, even as the medical work force drops, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. The number of aging baby boomers who will require extended care will double in the next decade.

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