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What's up, doc? Robots!

This roving helper assists doctors on hospital rounds

By JULIUS A. KARASH
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Pulmonologist Michael Nelson

If a robot enters your room the next time you're in the hospital, and it starts asking you questions, don't panic.

It may be a state-of-the-art RP-6 model like the one currently making the rounds at Shawnee Mission Medical Center. Named REMi by the hospital's doctors and staff, the 5'4" robot is equipped with a flat-screen computer monitor, two-way video feed, a microphone and a speaker.

REMi stands for "remote intervention." Connected to the Internet by the hospital's secure wireless network, REMi is guided by a physician using a joystick from a computerized control station in another location, usually the physician's home or office.

Doctors use REMi to look in on their patients and ask them questions. Patients get to talk to their doctor while seeing his or her face on the monitor.

This \$125,000 piece of equipment is not meant to replace the doctor, but is a useful tool in gathering information, physicians at Shawnee Mission said in a presentation at the hospital Tuesday.

"It's really not a robot seeing your patients for you, any more than a telephone is talking to your patients for you," said cardiologist Paul Kramer, one of the doctors at Shawnee Mission who uses REMi. "In comparison with talking with patients over the phone, this is a much more intimate interaction. They can see you smile, you can see if they have confusion on their face."

Shawnee Mission took delivery of REMi in December. Samuel H. Turner Sr., the hospital's president and chief



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Shawnee Mission Medical Center is using this REMi robot to allow physicians to visit patients when they can't physically be there. A doctor with a control panel at home or in an office can make a patient visit on a moment's notice, appearing on the robot's screen "head" (such as physician Joseph Petelin, above). The robot has two-way video, a microphone and a speaker, so patient and doctor can see and talk to each other. At right, physician Paul Kramer meets with patient John McIntyre of Mission Hills.

executive officer, said it was donated by the hospital's foundation.

"When I first heard about this particular robot, I doubted very much that it would have any practical use, and I doubted whether patients would take to it," Turner said.

But REMi has been accepted by patients, doctors and nurses, Turner said.

Among them is patient Lee Horstman, who was visited by REMi Tuesday. The visit enabled Horstman, who recently underwent gastrointestinal surgery, to talk with physician Joseph Petelin.

"It's a lot better than a phone call," said Horstman, an 80-year-old Shawnee resident. "You can actually see what I look like. If I have problems, the nurses can explain it to him and he can see what's going on."

Pulmonologist Michael Nelson said he used to regularly call the hospital at 10 p.m. to ask about his patients. Now he logs on and drives REMi around to check on his patients. He will still drive in late at night if he finds he's needed.

"We try to be here as much as we can, but obviously we're a scarce resource, and we can't be here 24 hours a day," Nelson said.

The RP-6 is made by InTouch Health Inc. of Santa Barbara, Calif. InTouch marketing manager Courtney McKnight said the model at Shawnee Mission Medical Center is the only one that's been delivered so far to the Kansas City area or the Midwest, excluding Detroit.

InTouch noted that in a study of 62 urology patients, using the robot for additional physician rounds reduced the length of stay for one in four patients.

Turner said the robot soon will be operable from a laptop computer and that Shawnee Mission probably will order at least two more this year. Each robot can be used by up to 10 doctors.

"The value of this for the community and the hospital is better patient care," physician Petelin said. "We think that we can provide better patient care, more access to surgeons and other personnel by having the robot available."

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