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Finding a new Companion

Robot's remote presence aids seniors' care

By Evan Pondel
Staff Writer

CALABASAS – James Miller says hello to his new neighbor at the Silverado Senior Living home, and despite a seemingly warm rapport, there is a fundamental difference between the two residents.

Meet Companion, a robot designed by Santa Barbara-based InTouch Health Inc. that is now living in Calabasas among seniors with dementia. Companion does not resemble a human being. It utilizes mechanized wheels for mobility and a flat screen monitor as its face. Yet the robot has the ability to communicate and observe the actions of fellow residents, a task that could soon help facilities like Silverado manage their clientele with Alzheimer's disease.

"We were initially worried about how our residents would respond to Companion," said Loren Shook, president and chief executive officer of Silverado. "But none of our residents appear frightened by the robot. Some just point at the robot and laugh."

Companion's sense of humor is based on its human operator. A computer and joystick with several firing buttons prompts Companion's movements, as a camera relays the robot's environment. At the same time, Companion's flat-screen face displays a real-time image of its operator. Controlled via the Internet and wireless technology, anyone can manipulate Companion from locations nationwide.

Indeed, operating a robot from afar can only offer a finite amount of help as caring for the elderly requires physical interaction. For that reason, Companion was a highfalutin idea to Anne Ellet, vice president of health services for Silverado, when she first heard about the remote-control robot.

Ellet, who is also a nurse practitioner, said she could not understand how a nurse or doctor would be able to distill care through Companion. But after an orientation, she began to see the robot's value.

With health care costs and staffing shortages significant impediments to living centers for seniors throughout the country, Companion enables executives and practitioners to observe patients and their facilities without having a physical presence, she said.

"If a person suffers from Parkinson's and I need to observe that individual's gait, but they are in California and I'm in

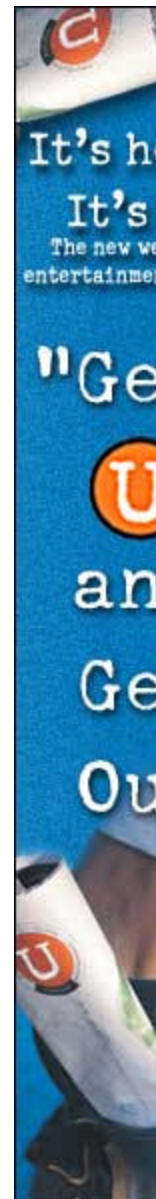


The remote presence robot by InTouch Health is demonstrated at Silverado Senior Living in Calabasas. (Evan Yee / Daily News)

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Minnesota, Companion enables me to do that. It's almost as if it's an extension of myself," Ellet said. "I can then recommend an appropriate therapy for this person and they don't have to wait for a personal visitation."

Silverado is the first senior community to host Companion. Yulun Wang, chairman and chief executive officer of InTouch, said Silverado was an ideal environment for the robot's beta testing due to the facility's layout and population.



"Obviously, we hope to find several other applications for Companion," said Wang, an electrical engineer from Santa Barbara. "But senior centers are the primary targets for now."

Silverado is far from an average senior center. Costing about \$4,000 a month for a shared room, the center is a Peter Pan-esque take on living with Alzheimer's. Jungle gyms and sandboxes await the residents outside, while friendly Saint Bernards trot freely around the home.

Shook said comfort is what Silverado strives for and that is why the home anticipates purchasing a Companion for about \$2,500 to \$3,000 a month upon completion of the beta testing. The robot has enough battery juice to last eight hours and travel at a top speed of 2 mph. Controlling Companion is similar to a remote control car – it's responsive to every twitch of the joystick.

Dr. Dan Osterweil, a professor of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles, expressed moderate skepticism when asked about Companion's utility.

"But it's good to be skeptical about these things. A robot cannot take the place of a human caregiver," Osterweil said. "Although, under the right circumstance, I do think Companion has tremendous potential."

Specifically, Osterweil intends to conduct studies surrounding the eating habits of the elderly. Companion will enable Osterweil to observe caregivers and their recipients during mealtime.

While some argue that Companion is simply a remote control camera and monitor on wheels, Osterweil said the technology is more useful because it allows the operator to communicate with the patient or caregiver.

"And this is just one example of how a relationship between human beings and machines can be beneficial," Osterweil said. "Robots like Companion will soon be performing tasks that are much more complex."

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