



HEALTH

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A "rounding robot" rolls down a corridor at Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo, Calif., with Dr. Thomas Shaver's face displayed on a video screen. The contraption lets the physician interact with patients from a remote location.

## Robot doctor gets thumbs-up from patients

**Half of those surveyed prefer virtual visit by their own physician to real visit by unfamiliar doctor**

Which would you rather have come to your hospital room: a doctor you've never met before, or a robot that lets you interact with your personal physician? A new study indicates that many patients would prefer the robot they know to the human they don't know.

The study, conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University and presented Saturday at the American Urological Association's annual meeting in San Francisco, focused on how patients reacted to a "rounding robot." Fifteen of the mobile robo-docs, manufactured by California-based InTouch Health, have been placed in hospitals and nursing homes nationwide.

The 200-pound (90-kilogram) robots stand about 5 feet (1.5 meters) tall. They have flat video screens for heads, and video cameras serve as their eyes and ears.

Using a joystick, a doctor can operate the rounding robot to check on patients from another building or another country, via the Internet and wireless links.

The doctor's face appears on the robot's screen, and he or she interacts with the patient through the real-time video hookup.

The aim of the technology isn't to replace human doctors, but to make it more convenient for doctors to check in with their patients, and for patients to get quick access to personal physicians who aren't at the hospital.

"It's a way to communicate in a time of need and inaccessibility," said Dr. Samer Salka, an interventional cardiologist at Oakwood Hospital in Dearborn, Mich. "At 2 a.m., when I need to see an EKG or talk to a patient, I should be able to do that right from home. I can

make a diagnosis right away and then come in [to the hospital] if I need to."



Dr. Thomas Shaver, a surgeon at Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo, Calif., operates InTouch Health's robot remotely using a joystick. Shaver sees what's going on via a video link, and a Webcam focused on his face helps him interact with patients.

### **Virtual vs. real visit**

The Johns Hopkins experiment, conducted at the Maryland university's hospital, involved 60 patients recuperating from surgery. Thirty of the patients were randomly selected to receive visits by the robo-doc once in lieu of an actual visit by their doctor.

"Generally, the robot checked up on patients, asked them how they were feeling, inspected their surgical sites to ensure proper healing, and answered questions," said Dr. Louis Kavoussi, a professor of urology at Johns Hopkins and the study's lead author. Two weeks after the patients were discharged, a questionnaire asked them about the "telerounds."

Half of those queried said they would prefer a telerounding visit by their own physician to a real visit by another physician. Half said that telerounding should become a standard practice for post-operative patient management, and 57 percent said they would feel comfortable having telerounds as part of their future care.

### **Wave of the future?**

Eighty percent of the patients taking part in the study thought the robo-doc would increase accessibility to their physician, while 76 percent believed having the robot available would permit physicians to provide more medical information.

"Most patients were very comfortable with this new technology," Kavoussi said.

Kavoussi owns InTouch Health stock and is a paid member of the company's scientific advisory board. The terms of the arrangement are being managed by the Johns Hopkins University in accordance with its conflict-of-interest policies.

InTouch leases the robots for \$3,000 a month, which includes computer software, training and technical support. The robots are not for sale because the software is updated about once a month, said Timothy Wright, InTouch's vice president of marketing.

This report includes information from The Associated Press and Johns Hopkins University.