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Robot 'Nurse' Puts a Human Face on Elderly Health Care

By Chi-Chi Zhang
The Salt Lake Tribune

It's sort of a nurse that looks after older people. But it's really a robot that changes faces when it changes users.

Known as the Companion, the new line of technology recently arrived at Silverado Senior Living Center in Murray to help with the dire need for more nurses and expert resources.

The Companion will put care providers in Murray in real-time touch with medical experts at other Silverado facilities, which specialize in Alzheimer's care, without having to travel. The robot acts as a Web cam with a twist: it can maneuver itself to whoever is in need, from patients to doctors.

"There are currently over 400,000 unfilled nursing positions in the country and the numbers are rising," said Timothy Wright, a spokesman for the robot's manufacturer, Santa Barbara, Calif.-based InTouch. "InTouch believes the Companion will help ease the gaps that need to be filled. The Companion also provides a zoom camera that can focus on details of patients, such as symptoms of diseases, making it easier for medical experts to diagnose the problems."

The Companion is a 4-foot-tall device on wheels that holds an LCD display screen, like that of a computer, which shows the face of whoever is operating the robot from a remote location. That "whoever" could be anywhere in the country.

The person operates the robot from a computer via the Internet and can see through a video camera and hear through a microphone embedded in the



InTouch shows how a medical professional can check on a patient from a remote location via the Companion.

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robot. The robot can be manipulated using a joystick.

As the robot wanders the facility greeting people in its path, electronic sensors allow the user to "feel" when people are close by.

"It's easy to find yourself engaged in a conversation with the person who's operating the robot, it feels almost as if they are standing right next to you," said Mark Mostow, a spokesman for Silverado.

Although the robot is a strong addition to the health-care profession and elderly-care facilities, according to Wright, there is still much improvement to be made.

"We can make this better; adding features such as arms on the robot so it can open doors and push elevator buttons are just some of the improvements we want to add in the future," said Wright.

In collaboration with InTouch, Silverado Senior Living, based in San Juan Capistrano, Calif., will be adding additional Companions in its four Texas facilities before the end of the year.

"We hope, if the robots are successful and they become a necessity in the long run, to have one in all 12 locations," said Mostow.

Although only four Companions are now leased out across the country, InTouch hopes to expand its health-care clientele in the future. The typical cost of an installation per month is about \$3,000. The costs varies depending on the size of installation and accessibility to a broadband Internet connection.



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