

ROBO-DOCS AID RURAL HOSPITALS: ROBOTS PROVIDE VITAL LINK TO OUTSIDE
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Using joysticks and computer mice, the doctors and nurses gathered at Sebastopol's Palm Drive Hospital remotely moved two space-age-looking robots around a Santa Barbara practice room that featured a mannequin lying in a hospital bed.

The health care professionals were getting better acquainted with a technology that proponents say can assist rural hospitals in keeping patients while technology brings far-away specialists to the bedside.

Palm Drive is hosting a four-day ``Robotic School of Telemedicine," led by Dr. Jim Gude, the hospital's intensive care specialist whose company links specialists to small hospitals.

The 5-foot-tall, rolling robots, one of which now operates at Palm Drive, allow specialists to have two-way audio/video communication with hospital staff and their patients. The robot has a LCD video screen and two cameras mounted on top, and uses special sensors to warn when it is in danger of bumping into an object.

Gude said the two-way video is important because previous products allowed the doctor to see the patient, but not the reverse. Patients typically felt uncomfortable talking to a camera.

``Part of this is trying to make this human," said Gude, who has been on the Sonoma County medical scene for 37 years.

Another problem was that the cameras weren't precise enough for the doctors' needs. But those watching this week said the robot's remote video

cameras allowed them to see as well as if their eyes were a few inches away from a patient or a CAT scan.

“The quality of the imagery is so good,” said David Murphy, a psychologist and part of the medical staff at Palm Drive.

He was one of 10 health care professionals who gathered for the seminar held in a Palm Drive conference room.

Michelle Feeney, a nurse practitioner at Barton Memorial Hospital in South Lake Tahoe, said she hopes her hospital's robots will make it easier for patients to be seen by specialists.

“In order to see a rheumatologist, you need to drive to Carson City, Nevada, or Sacramento,” she said.

The robots, produced by InTouch Health of Santa Barbara, can be leased for \$6,500 a month, said Matthew Williams, the company's regional manager.

Palm Drive CEO James Russell credited the robot with helping reopen the hospital's intensive care unit and bringing in new income, a key step as Palm Drive works to remove itself from bankruptcy protection.

“We would not be here without it,” Russell said of the robot. “It's that simple.”

Dr. Richard Sacks-Wilner, who practices internal medicine at Mendocino Coast Hospital in Fort Bragg, said a robot would allow his hospital's emergency room to receive better assistance from specialists in such areas as neurology and pediatric intensive care.

As well, he said, the technology allows the specialist to gather critical information for making a diagnosis.

“You get that detailed history by talking to the patient,” he said.

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Photo: 3 by CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

1. Dr. Richard Sacks-Wilner of Mendocino Coast District

Hospital examines the remote presence robot's camera perspective

during a training seminar Monday at Palm Drive Hospital in

Sebastopol. The robot has helped Palm Drive reopen its intensive care

unit.

2. InTouch Health's robot can be leased for \$6,500 a month. It's 5

feet tall.

3. Matthew Williams of InTouch Health, left, shows Dr. Richard

Sacks-Wilner how the remote presence robot works Monday at Palm Drive

Hospital in Sebastopol.

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