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Robots creating innovations in surgery, one incision at a time

By Alanna Dvorak

TIMES-MIRROR STAFF WRITER

Peeking into an operating room at Inova Loudoun Hospital in Lansdowne, it doesn't look like a surgery is being performed.

There's a patient on an operating table, sure, and there are all the requisite surgical tools such as scalpels and bovies in the room – and there's a surgeon in the room.

But the tools are attached to metal arms and, rather than standing over top the patient, the surgeon is sitting behind a console, controlling the arms digitally.

This is a da Vinci surgery.

An emerging new technology in medicine, the da Vinci surgical system offers a new way of performing surgeries using robotics.

Surgical tools are attached to robotic arms with 720 degree rotation ability. In addition, an arm holds a camera that can go inside the patient, giving doctors a magnified, three-dimensional and high definition view of the site of the surgery.

The benefits aren't just for the doctors, however. The system allows for smaller incisions, meaning less blood loss, less pain and shorter recovery time.

"[Patients] need a lot less pain medicine and a lot less IV pain medicine," said Dr. Jennifer Young, a urologist at Inova Loudoun. "They're typically okay to go home in a day."

Young completed her residency at the University of California – Irvine, specializing in minimally invasive surgical procedures, including robotics surgery.

First used in prostate removal, the da Vinci system is now used for a myriad of surgical procedures, including hysterectomies, gall bladder removal and hernia repair.

In December, Young, with Dr. Nicholas Lailas and nurse practitioner Mari Parker of The Urology Group, completed an innovative kidney stone removal procedure, thought to be one of the first done with the method.

An advocate of the da Vinci system, Young notes that a skilled surgeon is still required.

"The robot is a tool," She said. "You still need a surgeon who knows what they're doing, knows the anatomy and knows the procedure."

The da Vinci system is a relatively new technology, with the first surgeries performed in 2000. Inova

acquired the technology in 2009 and bought a second machine in December 2013. The month prior, in November 2013, Inova Loudoun performed its 550th da Vinci surgery.

The da Vinci system isn't without controversy. The nearly \$2 million price tag is cumbersome. In addition, customer complaints related to the robots launched an FDA investigation in 2013, which is still ongoing.

Still, Young and Jaye Sutton, Inova Loudoun Hospital Director of Perioperative and Surgical Services, think robot-assisted surgeries are here to stay – and are likely to expand.

"I think there's always a thought about what else can we do with this technology," Sutton said.



Dr. Ruchi Garg positions one of the arms of the da Vinci Surgical System before a surgery. The machine has four arms, including one to hold a camera, to allow a new robotic style of surgery. COURTESY INOVA HOSPITAL



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