

Robot siblings working on the Covid-19 frontline

Two special virus immune team members are helping to reduce exposure of medical personnel at the Tygerberg Hospital's Covid-19 ICU.



Telepresence robot Quintin with some of the staff from Tygerberg Hospital's Covid-19 ICU.

The team consists of Quintin and Salma, robot siblings, who help doctors, nursing staff, physiotherapists and other medical personnel with virtual ward rounds. The duo allow a person to be virtually present in the room. For example, they allow doctors to communicate with and check on their patients remotely, zooming in on their vital signs via their tablet.

Made by Double Robotics, the pair each comprise a tablet attached to a two-wheeled motorised Segway, which can be controlled by a desktop, tablet or smartphone as they do the ward rounds. The robots have a built-in microphone and zoom function enabling conversation between the doctor and patient, displaying the doctor's face on the tablet screen. Medical staff are also able to zoom in on the patient's vital signs, providing information on the Covid-19 patients such as blood pressure, pulse, electrocardiogram readings, and oxygen saturation in the blood.

Donation

Quintin was the first to start working on the unit. His sister, Salma, was donated to Professor Coenie Koegelenberg, a specialist pulmonologist, working on the unit, by retail solutions company, Smollan.

“When we heard about Quintin’s role in helping doctors and patients at the frontline of the pandemic, we knew we could add further support with our robot which has similar facilities,” says Rudi Nienaber, innovative executive, Smollan.

In this way doctors are protected from coming into contact with highly infectious patients or spreading the virus to their family and other people. They can work remotely, so that they can still carry out their duties, even if they have been quarantined but are still well enough to work.

“The robot was purchased for use at the Smollan innovation LAB, which is our innovation platform where we generate and accelerate ideas and experiments that could become the foundations of future commerce solutions,” says Nienaber.

“While robots do not replace people, they play a key role in saving time and medical personnel capacity on the ward rounds. Although robots have previously played a role in healthcare, their vital support under infectious Covid-19 conditions will help fast-track their use in the medical field and assist in expediting the necessary procedures to help contain the spread of the pandemic in our country,” says Nienaber.

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