The era of the robots is now?

If you read the news either as hard copy or online I am sure that you notice reports about the presence and use of robots more frequently; and often these have a positive message related to the benefits and advantages of the use of robots. My most recent encounter with similar news was last week’s reading about a robot in the US, called VGo, which helped to ‘Diagnose concussion on the football field’ of an American football player (Erikson 2016). Not to mention other titles such as “Robots are coming to grandma’s nursing home” (Schiller 2016)!

Are they really happening and are they widely used? Well the answer at the moment is not widely and usually these news stories are coming from trials around the world where scientists are testing the efficiency of these machines. Still there are some areas such as the military and our healthcare system where robots are very well established. Reflecting on our practice in the perioperative arena, robotic surgery, which sounded like a sci-fi scenario ten years ago, is now common for many surgical specialties with undoubtable advantages for both the patients and the healthcare sector.

In the above case the robots act as assistants to the surgeon (eg: DaVinci Surgical System) but they can also be used as communicators (telemedicine with VGo and RP-VITA) and messengers/ couriers (HOSPI) acting always as an additional, not a replacement, for healthcare practitioners. There are a few issues to be addressed before the extensive use of robotics/robots, especially in cases where the robots will act autonomously. Issues related to the so called ‘RoboEthics’. We need to answer the questions about the level of autonomy and responsibility and to address the need for universal robot legislation and rights.

Personally, seeing myself as a nurse futurist, I am a strong advocate of robotic and digital technologies in general as an additional and supportive tool to our caring services for our patients. My belief is that we can use them to enhance rather than eliminate the ‘human touch’, which can be more than the physical one, a virtual presence or a voice! Of course there are many miles that we have to travel before we see ourselves in the future working side by side with robots and there are many sceptics questioning their value and the need to have them; as well as the ethical issues around the question of who will have the responsibility for their actions and the fear they will take over our jobs!

Talking about miles to travel though, we need to think of the vehicle that we will use. Technology is going very fast forward and developments that would normally need decades to be completed, nowadays need a few years! So maybe the era of working side by side is not so far away.

In any case I don’t think that there are many people out there who would now question whether we need computers or cars to do our jobs or not! This current issue of the Journal is addressing a few of the above elements and I am sure it will be pleasant reading not only for the digital nursing evangelists like me, but also for the digital sceptics.

Dr Theo Fotis
Senior Lecturer
School of Health Sciences
University of Brighton

References
