In August, Mayo Clinic’s emergency telemedicine service began using robots to provide consults at approximately 50 hospitals in nine states.

The humanoid-looking robots contain cameras that zoom, pan and tilt, microphones, video screens, and speakers as well as peripheral attachments that measure heart and respiration rate, oxygen saturation and blood pressure. They also are integrated with the patient’s electronic health record.

Mayo Clinic doctors control the robots from a remote location using their computer, tablet or smartphone, and can drive them around a clinic or hospital. The robots sense objects in their path and are able to move around without interfering in a busy hospital setting.

Despite their capabilities, the robots don’t replace clinicians. A nurse or another health professional must still be present with the patient when the robots are used (they must place the robot’s electronic stethoscope on the patient’s chest, for example).

Mayo was an early experimenter with the robots, which are made by InTouch Health of Santa Barbara, California. Several major medical centers around the country now use them.

Before widely deploying the robots, Mayo conducted and published research on using them in emergency departments and critical care units. “We’ve been researching these robots in telemedicine since 2007,” says Bart Demaerschalk, MD, a neurologist and medical director of telemedicine services at Mayo Clinic’s Center for Connected Care. In their eight years of study, he says, they have determined the technology to be the next best thing to seeing a patient in person.

Mayo now uses them in their stroke and neonatology programs, emergency departments, critical care units, hospital wards, labor and deliver suites, and procedural and operating rooms.

In the future, Demaerschalk says, they will likely use the robots for patients who need emergency psychiatry care, burn treatment, trauma care, and cardiology, neurology and epilepsy services.

– HOWARD BELL

AMA issues telemedicine guidelines and policies

At its June 2016 meeting, the American Medical Association (AMA) approved new policies and guidelines to “achieve the promise and avoid the pitfalls of telehealth.” The policies and guidelines acknowledge that telehealth (including telemedicine) is an emerging and legitimate way to provide health care. Among its recommendations, the AMA encourages physicians who use telemedicine and other telehealth technologies to:

- Inform patients about the limitations of services provided
- Advise patients how to arrange for follow-up care
- Encourage patients to inform their primary care doctor that they used a telehealth provider.

The AMA encourages medical school and residency programs to include formalized telehealth training in their curriculum. The AMA also is encouraging states to pass parity laws so telehealth visits are reimbursed at rates comparable to those paid for in-person visits. – HOWARD BELL