

Robots give surgeons greater reach

Neurosurgical robotic program expands to Cape Breton

HEALTH

By Beth Johnston - The Daily News

The night before Gerry Gray's surgery to stop the tremor that shook his left hand for 39 years, a robot rolled into his hospital room and introduced itself as one of Canada's top brain surgeons.

On the screen in front of the five-foot robot was the real-time image of Ivar Mendez, head of Halifax's Brain Repair Centre, who would be performing the next morning's surgery.

"It was a *Star Trek* moment. We couldn't believe we had just had this conversation with a robot," Gerry's wife Florence Gray said yesterday at the announcement that the QEII

Health Sciences Centre's Neurosurgical Robotic Program is expanding to Cape Breton.

Cape Breton businessman Joe Shannon donated \$400,000 to the Cape Breton Regional Hospital to purchase the \$350,000 robot, which acts as the surgeon's eyes and ears. The purchase will connect Cape Breton with leading brain surgeons in Halifax who will now be able to consult in emergency situations.

"This will enable us to save crucial time in making decisions for patients," Mendez said.

The Brain Repair Centre is in talks with the Yarmouth hospital about purchasing a robot. Mendez hopes some day soon every hospital in the province will have one.

Mendez uses a laptop with a video-game like controller to move the robot through the hospital hallways. He greets doctors, nurses and patients and zooms in on the face of

the person he's speaking with. The robot has a 180-degree view, with a full 360-degree rotation.

He is now able to perform brain surgery in Halifax, fly to Europe that night and log on to the Internet to do his rounds at the QEII.

"(I can see) how they're doing, check their wounds, talk to the nurses, their families, to the residents and see how they're doing after the operation," he said.

"It will enable us to deliver care of the highest calibre to anybody in the country."

Cape Breton and Halifax have the only two telepresence robots in Canada.

Gray, who picked up a cup of coffee by the handle for the first time in 20 years this week, is grateful to Mendez in both his human and robot forms.

"I never thought I would see the day when I would be talking to a robot and be happy about it."

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