

The Robots Have Dawned: Meet The CareBot

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In my last post, I spoke of Asimov's planet, Solaria, a society in which humans live long and are attended to by robots. But this science fiction is close to becoming reality-particularly for our elderly in need of care.

One example is Gecko Systems' CareBot, a robot specifically designed to provide monitoring, automatic reminders, companionship, and emergency notification for care receivers. This goes way beyond those emergency notification gadgets for mom to call when she has fallen and can't get up. Although the CareBot is not capable of helping mom get up, it is capable of calling family members and emergency services.

In my work as a psychologist in nursing homes, I recall one woman who did fall, and lay on her bathroom floor for close to three days before one of her neighbors wondered why she hadn't seen Alice all weekend. Another problem with the typical emergency notification gadgets-ubiquitously seen on TV-is that if the wearer is unconscious, th

ere will be notification. Not so with a robot.

In this video, "One CareBot, One Family," we see the robot approaching mom and asking,

"Have you fed the dog today?"

"Emily, no. I'll go do that right now."

All this can be viewed on a remote monitor, outshining the baby monitors so ubiquitous among today's worried parents.

Although there is no price listed for the CareBot, Geckosystems argues that the robot will be a cost effective alternative to the tens of thousands spent annually on human care. The average annual cost for a nursing home approaches \$70,000, assisted living is \$30,000, and the cost of a home health aide is easily \$20 to \$30 per hour.

These robots, as noted, are not capable of hands-on care-something for the future-but I see no reason why they could not be the solution for situations where the carereceiver is physically capable of self-care but forgetful, and needs regular cueing for tasks such as medication, personal hygiene, or feeding the dog. Add to that the monitoring aspect, and we have something to work with.

Geckosystems is cautiously optimistic about the business potential of their CareBots. Although they see the market potential in terms of tens of billions of dollars they anticipate annual sales, for the short-term, to be only millions: "We expect these sales despite-and perhaps because of-the present recession due to pent up demand for significant cost reduction in eldercare expenses."

I wonder what Medicare has to say about this. Will we soon be treated to commercials akin to those for motorized chairs. "If Medicare won't pay for your CareBot, we will."

And what of the human touch? It's expensive, but is it irreplaceable? I know some people who would prefer to be cared for by a machine. The CareBot could be just the thing for the aged with autism. That aside, I know many frail, elderly who like nothing more than to complain about the human care they are receiving. Perhaps they will miss that with a CareBot. But I am taken with how easily humans respond to machines as if they were human too. How many times have you yelled at your computer-or car-as if it could understand and be hurt by what you are saying. The woman in the CareBot video has no problem with this concept. Neither does, apparently, the robot-and I use this word advisedly-herself.

"It's 5:55pm, time to watch Jeopardy."

"Emily, go away, I have company."

"You don't love me anymore."

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Links:

[1] <http://www.geckosystems.com/>

[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxK46chfP6A&eurl=http://www.geckosystems.com/&feature=player_embedded

[3] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/adventures-in-old-age>