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Medicine's future

Mehran Anvari stands at the threshold of major medical changes that will profoundly affect the lives of people across Ontario, across Canada and perhaps everywhere.

What the Hamilton surgeon, inventor and educator sees from his vantage point is less invasive, more effective, more efficient and equitable care through technology, where medicine has some serious catching up to do.

"I think that medicine has dragged behind," he says. "I would say in the next five to 10 years, there will be a major revolution in the way people interact with their physicians."



Dr Anvari Portrait Dr. Anvari with Image Guided Automated Robot
Gary Yokoyama/The Hamilton Spectator

He sees televisual medical appointments that let us visit the doctor without waiting in an office, machinery that finds and destroys tumours before they take hold, remote robotic surgery by doctors across the room or across the country, and keyhole bariatric surgeries that improve and extend the lives of obese patients while saving taxpayers untold millions.

Anvari is not working alone by any means, and while he emphasizes he is a facilitator more than a driver, it's also true that his work touches all these developing areas.

Within the year, the lab of which he is CEO and scientific director — a partnership of space-robotics giant MDA Corporation, the federal government, St. Joseph's Healthcare and McMaster University, among others — expects to begin patient testing of a new image-guided robot that could propel the detection and treatment of breast cancer into the modern era, making it more effective and less traumatic.

The platform — called the Image Guided Autonomous Robot, or IGAR, uses more accurate, much smaller and more effective robotic probes in conjunction with far more sensitive scanning techniques to differentiate between benign lumps and cancerous tumours even at a very early stage.

It would retrieve biopsy samples with pinpoint accuracy, analyze them and treat early tumours without open surgeries. The result could be better outcomes and less pain for patients and savings for all by reducing postoperative hospital stays.

Since IGAR has yet to be unveiled, Anvari can't say much more about it yet, but if the equipment and methods work as planned, he said they could also lend themselves to earlier detection and treatment of cancers in the lungs, liver, kidneys and prostate gland. The concept also holds promise for delicate spinal surgeries.

Bill Orovan, chair of the surgery department in McMaster's faculty of health sciences, said Anvari helped carry the once experimental concept of keyhole surgery through a barrage of skepticism to the point where it is now routine. He expects the new platform from Anvari's lab to have a similar impact.

"His new focus on medical robotics is a huge potential growth area," Orovan says. "I can say that these things will be revolutionary, not evolutionary, in terms of their impact on medical treatment and medical science."

Anvari says Hamilton's scale, resources, personnel and co-operation among its health, education and research institutions make it a crucible for innovations such as these.

"The beauty of Hamilton is that it's large enough to have a richness of individuals with very special capabilities, and at the same time it's not so large that we can't connect," he says. "In Hamilton, it's very complementary, very collaborative."

He hopes biotechnology will lead the city's economic redevelopment, and sees parallels with other cities that have made similar conversions.

"Sometimes, Hamiltonians are a bit humble about what their city has to offer," he says. "I think we need to be much more open about saying this is an incredible city."

Anvari, 51, a busy surgeon and McMaster surgery professor, has long been a leader in the once far-out fields of keyhole surgery and telerobotic surgery. He founded and continues to direct the Centre for Minimal Access Surgery here. Since 1999, it has trained 3,000 doctors and nurses in new techniques.

Anvari was at the controls in 2003 for the first hospital-to-hospital telerobotic surgery ever, when he manipulated surgical instruments from Hamilton to operate on a patient in North Bay, 400 km away. To date, he has performed 22 complex procedures using telerobotic technology.



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