

Robotic Surgery Is High-Tech 'Tour De Force' - But Is It Safe?

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The newlywed had been grappling with excruciatingly painful periods for as long as she could remember, when her doctor told her one way she could end the agony was a hysterectomy. Michelle Zarick, then 37, didn't question it when the doctor wanted to use the latest high-tech option that medicine had to offer: a hysterectomy done with the help of a robot.

"She mentioned that doing the robotic-assisted hysterectomy would shorten my recovery time at home," says Zarick, who had been diagnosed with fibroids, non-cancerous tumors that grow in the uterine walls.

So Zarick agreed - and initially, everything seemed fine. But in the weeks after the 2009 procedure with the machine, called the da Vinci, she suffered a horrifying complication that is still impacting her life.

Across the country, nearly 400,000 robotic-assisted surgeries were performed last year, according to Intuitive Surgical, the company that makes the robots. Use of the machine for performing hysterectomies is on the rise, increasing from .5 in 2007 to 9.5 percent in 2010, according to a study published in a February issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association. Besides gynecological surgeries, the da Vinci can deftly perform procedures like heart surgeries, colorectal surgery, plus treatments for prostate, kidney, lung, throat and bladder cancers, among others.

The majority of the hundreds of thousands of robotic surgeries performed in the U.S. each year are done safely. However, as use of the machine increases, so are reports of injuries: The U.S. Food and Drug administration has received more than 200 reports since 2007 of burns, cuts, and infections - including 89 deaths -- after robotic surgery.

The robotic surgery works like this: The patient is on the operating table while the doctor sits a few feet away at a console, where he or she can manipulate the robotic arms while watching the procedure through a 3-D viewfinder.

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