First Robotic Atrial Fibrillation

Doctors at Beaumont Hospital in Troy have performed Michigan's first minimally invasive robotic procedure to correct atrial fibrillation. The robotic maze procedure is an alternative to open-heart surgery performed through keyhole incisions with fewer complications and a shorter hospital stay. Phillip Robinson, M.D., cardiovascular surgeon, Brian Williamson, M.D. and Ilana Kutinsky, D.O., both electrophysiology cardiologists, performed the robotic-assisted maze procedure on a 66-year-old woman last week.

A maze procedure is a surgical treatment for atrial fibrillation that is used to stop an irregular heartbeat and restore a normal heart rhythm. Patients are candidates for a maze procedure if their irregular heartbeat cannot be treated with medication or other nonsurgical approaches. "This new robotic maze procedure allows us to correct an electrical irregularity in the heart without having to perform open-heart surgery," says Dr. Robinson.

With the robotic maze procedure, the surgeon makes five tiny incisions the size of a dime in the patient's chest, inserting a small endoscopic robotic camera to view the outer surface of the heart. The surgeon sits at a console viewing 3-D images from the robotic camera as a device is then passed through the tiny incisions to ablate or areas of heart tissue, creating a scar that will block the conduction of abnormal electrical impulses and create a pathway, or maze, for normal electrical signals to travel to the heart's lower chambers.

"This procedure combines the specialized skills and expertise of a cardiovascular surgeon and an electrophysiology cardiologist to provide a new treatment option benefitting AF patients," says Dr. Kutinsky. The robotic maze procedure takes two to three hours to perform. Most patients are able to go home within two to three days after the procedure. Candidates for the maze procedure include those who cannot tolerate drugs, such as blood thinners; patients whose quality of life is limited by drugs; those who continue to slip into an irregular heart rhythm; and those who cannot have catheter ablation or have had it, but still have AF symptoms.

According to the American Heart Association, more than 2 million people have atrial fibrillation in the United States. About 15 percent of strokes occur in people with AF.

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