

Partners for Women's Health Offers Robotic Surgery at Exeter Hospital

EXETER, NH--Partners for Women's Health, an obstetrics and gynecology practice in Exeter, NH will now be offering robotic surgery to patients that qualify, thanks to Exeter Hospital's new da Vinci Xi surgical robot. Dr. Antonio Gargiulo, director of robotic surgery at Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston, and medical director of the Center for Reproductive Care at Exeter Hospital, has been performing robotic surgery for 12 years and has trained key members of the Exeter Hospital team. Dr. Evelyne Caron, one of Partners' physicians, has now been trained on the da Vinci robot and will be performing these surgeries going forward.

"Thanks to robotics, surgeries that in the past would have been more complex and would have taken longer, are now easier, safer and better for the patient," says Dr. Caron. "Surgeries that traditionally would have been done with a large incision are now done laparoscopically with the help of robots. Robotic surgery is especially helpful with fibroids, hysterectomies, and endometriosis issues. It will also be used for other modalities in the future, I'm sure."

Dr. Gargiulo notes that 85 percent of gynecological cancer surgery nationwide is now being done using robotics, but that the technology is fairly new to the Seacoast.

Dr. Caron says that there are still a lot of misconceptions when it comes to understanding robotic surgery. "The robot isn't doing the surgery," she explains. "The surgery is not automated. We operate the robot. It gives us a technological advantage. The surgeon has 3D vision and can see in incredible detail. For endometriosis surgery it can be very hard to see. The uterus, ovaries and Fallopian tubes can look like they are encased in cement, so there is risk of damaging surrounding organs. With robotic assistance, the visualization and manipulation of the tissue is so much better that it allows for safer surgery. The robotic arms give the surgeon a greater wrist rotation than Mother Nature. However, in terms of the actual operation, patients will still have a surgical assistant present, nurses and an anesthesiologist. The only difference is that the surgeon is behind the robotic console."

Under Dr. Gargiulo's direction, Dr. Caron spent extensive hours training on the robotic simulator, then performing "dry runs" with the simulator and a plastic patient. "There is a learning curve, which is why it's so great to have the simulator," she says. "You can do procedures over and over. The simulator is a training concept that medicine has borrowed from aviation and it works. We also have had the educator from da Vinci here, and we have done elaborate practice runs with the whole surgical team present. I have also assisted Dr. Gargiulo many times prior to operating myself."

Dr. Caron says that in terms of the operations themselves, the team has them down to a science. "Everyone's insides are a bit different, but the procedures for using the robotics are the same, and we have practiced these scenarios many times. We have become a very well-trained group. The challenge of adapting to a new technology was not as difficult as it could have been because we have all trained so thoroughly."

In addition to practicing obstetrics and general gynecology, Dr. Caron's specialty is pediatric and adolescent gynecology. Pursuing a specialty in robotics was not initially on her radar. "At Partners, we know that robotic surgery is the future and that it will be beneficial to our patients, the practice and the community if we have a doctor who adopts this as an additional specialty. I am thrilled to be the one. It's meant a lot of time on the simulator, but it's been worth it. The best surgeons are the ones who perform the same procedure hundreds of times, and that is my goal. I've been practicing medicine for 10 years now, so I welcome learning something new, and it's a skill that is only going to become more needed in the years to come. Being able to offer our patients the latest technological advances is something we strive for and this will be a boon."

Dr. Caron has already seen how robotics benefited a recent patient with challenging issues. "I recently operated on a woman with many medical issues who needed complex surgery. Normally, I would not have performed the surgery on her--it would have been too risky; she would have been referred elsewhere. Thanks to the robotics, we were able to make minor incisions, resulting in minimal blood loss and her post-op pain was greatly reduced. She only

needed Tylenol! In this age of opioid addiction, any time we can have a patient have major abdominal surgery and only need Tylenol, it's a victory. She also was able to have the surgery done at home with doctors she knew, and family nearby, and those things help with the healing process.”

Dr. Caron has become a huge fan of da Vinci, touting the robotic technology as providing patients with less risk of infection, less blood loss, faster recovery, and less use of pain medication. And, from a surgical prospective, it's a technology she enjoys.

“It's fun! It's kind of like a computer game,” she says. “It's very precise, almost dainty surgery, and it's cool. I'm holding control loops with my fingers and my feet are working pedals that move cameras and bring in more or less energy. I'm seeing these brilliant visuals in 3D. It's like you are immersed in a virtual realty world--like *Ready Player One!* --except it's an incredible window into the body. It's absolutely a new day for medicine.”

For more information about Partners for Women's Health, call (603) 772-0557 or visit www.womenshealthexeter.com.