John Muir Medical Center has two new surgical robots

Dr. Stephen Wells, QB/Gyn, left, demonstrates the daVinci system, the high definition robot to Kathy Baptiste, right, of Alamo, who was operated in April 2009 by Dr. Wells using the daVinci system at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek, Calif., Tue

WALNUT CREEK, Jul 22, 2009 (Contra Costa Times - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- Physicians at John Muir Medical Center say they can now do more precise, less-invasive surgeries with faster recovery times thanks to two new high-definition, state-of-the-art surgical robots recently purchased for the Walnut Creek and Concord campuses.

Surgeons showed off the equipment Tuesday during a demonstration at the hospital.

"This is awesome," said **Dr. Stephen Wells**, an obstetrician-gynecologist who has used the robot for hysterectomies and other surgeries. "The nice thing is you're able to do very, very complicated procedures easily." Funding for the $4 million purchase came from the John Muir Health Foundation, which raised the money through community donations that averaged $100.

"These are cutting-edge pieces of equipment," said Susan Woods, chairwoman of the foundation board. "It's really exciting to be able to go back to our donors and say, 'This is what you did.'"" Da Vinci surgical robots have been used in the nation's hospitals for many years. Several East Bay hospitals have them, and John Muir's Concord campus has had an older model since 2002.

Now, physicians in Walnut Creek no longer have to travel to Concord to do such surgeries, and both hospitals have the latest models, which give surgeons greater control and more maneuverability, said Dr. Babak Edraki, a gynecologist-oncology specialist.

The robot is particularly useful when patients have early stages of cervical or uterine

cancer, Edraki said, but it is not for everyone. Patients whose cancer has spread may require a more extensive, traditional surgery.

The robot is controlled by a surgeon, who sits at a monitor and console. One robotic arm has a tiny video camera, and the other three arms manipulate surgical instruments. The surgeon controls the arms while peering at a high-definition, three-dimensional image.

The latest model has "much more advanced and refined optics," said Dr. Brian Hopkins, a urologic surgeon who uses it to treat prostate cancer and to remove parts of cancerous kidney tumors while sparing the remainder of the organ.

Surgeries can be performed through four or five small incisions half an inch in length or less, Edraki said, compared to a standard surgery that may require a 12-inch incision.

Alamo resident Kathy Baptiste is sold on the equipment. In October, she went to another hospital after experiencing heavy bleeding and pain. She had laparoscopic surgery on her uterus and her left ovary was removed. But for the next seven months, she had severe pain and was in and out of a hospital emergency room. Her doctor could not figure out what was wrong and at one point suggested she see a psychiatrist.

A friend then told her about Wells. He quickly diagnosed her as having a post-surgical complication in which blood was trapped in her uterus and fallopian tube. Wells used the da Vinci robot to perform a hysterectomy, and within two weeks, Baptiste said, she was dancing at her niece's wedding.

"The recovery was just amazing," she said. "There was no pain at all. I was a little swollen and stiff, but nothing compared to what I had been going through the last seven months."