

Practice Makes Perfect: Essential Knowledge for Anyone Facing Surgery or Any Medical Procedure

As every new technology comes on the medical scene, both patients and their doctors can too easily be dazzled by the promise of something new and better. This is especially true with minimally invasive surgery of any kind. The promise is: Smaller cuts in your body, quicker recovery time, fewer complications. So what's not to like?

If you knew the surgeon about to cut you open had trained for your case with only a single weekend course with the manufacturer, and that he or she had done maybe a handful of the same procedure since that weekend, would you hesitate before signing the consent form? You should. Read on for more.

Prostate surgery with a robot called "da Vinci" is often sold to patients as the latest and greatest technology and a way to get a better outcome. But on the key long-term complications -- urinary incontinence and erectile dysfunction -- the "minimally invasive" robotic surgery may be no better than traditional surgery, and may be worse if the operator is inexperienced.

A recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) criticizes the benefits of the "minimally invasive" surgery as oversold. The operation does cut the average time in the hospital from three days to two, but brings with it both more short-term complications plus more long-term injuries like impotence.

[Click here](#) to read the official abstract of the study on the JAMA website.

The lead author is Dr. Jim Hu of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. "There has been rapid adoption of minimally invasive radical prostatectomy, however, outcomes have not been superior," Hu said.

Surgeons are trained to use the robot in a weekend course with the manufacturer. Dr. Hu said that a big part of the problem could be surgeons not getting enough experience with the device. He said he has now done more than 700 robotic prostate surgeries, but "it took several hundred cases before I thought I was doing really well in preserving erectile function and continence."

The new study brings home an issue that is discussed at length in my book, [The Life You Save: Nine Steps to Finding the Best Medical Care -- and Avoiding the Worst](#). Choosing the right surgeon is key to success, and patients need to ask about the surgeon's volume of cases exactly like theirs. For robotic prostate surgery, it's easy to find a surgeon with hundreds of cases. If that's an option, why would anyone settle for a surgeon who has only done a few dozen?