JOURNAL OF HEALTH, MEDICAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATIONS

VOLUME: 01 ISSUE: 03 (2023)

P-ISSN : 3105-4749 E-ISSN: 3105-4757

https://www.jhmri.com

Research Article

ROBOTICS IN MODERN SURGERY: ENHANCING PRECISION AND REDUCING RISK

[1]*Dr. Ayesha Khan*, [2]*Engr. Muhammad Bilal*, [3]*Dr. Laura M. Chen*, [4]*Prof. David R. Patel*

[1]*Department of Surgery, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan.*
Email: *ayesha.khan@aku.edu*

[2]*Robotics & Intelligent Systems Lab, School of Mechanical & Manufacturing Engineering (SMME), National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan.*
Email: *m.bilal@smme.nust.edu.pk*

[3]*Department of Urology, Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, OH, USA.*
Email: *laura.chen@ccf.org*

[4]*Faculty of Medicine, Imperial College London, UK.*
Email: *david.patel@imperial.ac.uk*

Abstract:

Robotic-assisted surgery (RAS) augments minimally invasive techniques with articulated instruments, tremor filtration, 3-D magnified visualization, and surgeon-controlled camera systems. Across urology, gynecology, general, thoracic, and colorectal specialties, RAS can reduce blood loss, shorten length of stay, and improve ergonomics; however, benefits vary by procedure, surgeon experience, and institutional workflow. Safety profiles depend on rigorous training, credentialing, and human-factors engineering to mitigate device- and user-related hazards. Economic value hinges on utilization rates, case mix, and perioperative efficiencies that offset capital and maintenance costs. Emerging capabilities—including AI-assisted perception, automation of subtasks, tele-mentoring, and AR overlays—promise further gains in precision and consistency while raising new regulatory and ethical questions. This article synthesizes current evidence on effectiveness, risk, and implementation and proposes a roadmap for safe, equitable scaling in both high- and low-resource health systems.

Keywords: *robotic-assisted surgery, surgical precision, minimally invasive surgery, patient outcomes, learning curve, safety and risk, health economics, artificial intelligence*

Introduction

Surgical robotics integrates master-slave telemanipulation, enhanced endoscopic vision, and wristed instruments to reproduce the dexterity of open surgery through small ports. Since the first FDA clearances in the early 2000s, RAS has expanded from prostatectomy to hysterectomy, partial nephrectomy, rectal resection, bariatric procedures, mitral repair, and more. While single-center series have reported reductions in blood loss and length of stay, randomized trials and meta-analyses reveal nuanced, indication-specific effects on complications, conversion to open surgery, positive margin rates, functional outcomes, and costs. Parallel advances in simulation, dual-console mentoring, and structured pathways have shortened learning curves, yet variability persists. Health systems must therefore evaluate RAS as a socio-technical program—encompassing equipment, training, workflow redesign, and governance—rather than a device purchase alone.

Technology Landscape & System Architecture:

Master–Slave Telemanipulation Model:

At the heart of robotic surgery is the **telemanipulation principle**. The surgeon sits at a **master console**, away from the sterile field, while robotic arms mounted on a **bedside cart** perform the actual maneuvers inside the patient.

Signal Conversion: Movements of the surgeon's hands and fingers are captured by sensitive sensors and translated into digital commands.

Latency-Free Transmission: These signals are relayed instantly to the robotic arms, ensuring real-time synchronization between surgeon intent and instrument movement.

Ergonomics: Unlike conventional laparoscopy (where surgeons must stand in awkward positions for hours), the console's seated posture reduces fatigue and musculoskeletal strain.

This architecture ensures **precision and control**, while separating the surgeon physically from the operating field, which also opens doors for **remote telesurgery**.

Visualization & Imaging Systems:

A major leap of robotic surgery is in **visual feedback**:

3D High-Definition Endoscopy: Provides binocular depth perception, magnification up to 15×, and detailed tissue contrast.

High Dynamic Range (HDR): Allows simultaneous visualization of dark and bright areas, preventing "blown-out" images of reflective tissue.

Advanced Imaging Modes: Systems like Firefly (indocyanine green fluorescence) highlight vascularity, bile ducts, or tumor margins in real time, guiding surgical decisions.

Augmented Reality Overlays (in newer systems): Anatomy maps or AI-driven segmentation can be superimposed on the surgeon's view.

The combination of **high-quality optics + digital augmentation** transforms surgery from being "eye–hand" limited to **data-rich and image-guided**.

Instrumentation & Kinematics:

Robotic instruments mimic — and even surpass — the dexterity of the human wrist.

Degrees of Freedom (DoF):

Standard laparoscopic tools have 4 DoF (pitch, yaw, insertion, rotation). Robotic tools add **wrist-like articulation** with up to 7 DoF, allowing complex suturing inside confined cavities like the pelvis.

Motion Scaling: Large hand movements at the console are converted into micromovements (e.g., a 5:1 scale), permitting **sub-millimeter precision**.

Tremor Filtration: Natural human tremors are digitally smoothed, making it possible to work around delicate nerves or vessels.

Energy Integration: Electrocautery, ultrasonic scalpels, and staplers can be directly controlled from the console without assistant intervention.

These design features make tasks like intracorporeal knot tying — once a hallmark of laparoscopic skill — **far easier and more reproducible**.

Safety Systems & Fault Tolerance:

Safety is central to system architecture. Robotic platforms incorporate multiple fail-safes:

Collision Avoidance: Sensors detect when arms approach one another, preventing instrument clashes.

Force & Torque Monitoring: Prevents excessive pressure on tissues.

Automatic Shut-off: If visualization is lost or energy instruments malfunction, the system halts immediately.

Instrument Life Tracking: Each robotic instrument has a predefined number of uses (e.g., 10 cases). After expiry, the system locks it out to avoid wear-related accidents.

Redundant Power & Control Lines: Backup systems ensure continuity even if one subsystem fails.

This layered safety design reflects **aviation-style engineering**, where multiple redundancies protect against rare but high-stakes failures.

Training, Simulation, and Credentialing:

Since robotic surgery alters the traditional surgeon–patient interface, training is critical:

Virtual Reality Simulators: Allow surgeons to practice suturing, cutting, and dissection in lifelike virtual organs, with instant feedback on precision, economy of motion, and error rates.

Dual-Console Systems: A senior surgeon can share control with a trainee, seamlessly handing over tasks while maintaining safety.

Objective Performance Metrics: Training progress is measured quantitatively (e.g., time to complete a task, instrument path length, error counts).

Graduated Privileges: Surgeons move stepwise from simulations → assisting at the console → partial procedures → full cases, under proctor supervision.

This structured pathway shortens learning curves while reducing risks during early adoption.

Emerging Innovations & Future Trends:

Compact, Modular Platforms: Future systems are smaller, mobile, and modular, allowing hospitals to configure them for specific specialties (2–4 arms).

Haptic Feedback: Current systems lack tactile feel; new devices use **force sensors** and **vibrotactile actuators** to restore a sense of tissue resistance.

Open Ecosystems: Next-generation robots aim to support instruments from multiple manufacturers, breaking the monopoly of proprietary tools and reducing consumable costs.

AI & Data Integration: AI algorithms may assist with camera positioning, tissue recognition, or "safety boundaries" around critical structures.

These trends suggest that surgical robots will evolve from **mechanical tools** to **intelligent surgical ecosystems**.

The architecture of robotic surgery represents a marriage of **precision engineering, computer science, and clinical practice**. From stereoscopic vision to tremor-free articulation, every component is designed to extend human surgical capability while minimizing risks. The coming decade will likely see further **miniaturization, AI integration, and global accessibility**, reshaping how surgery is performed worldwide.

Clinical Effectiveness & Patient Outcomes:

Urology: Prostate and Kidney Surgery:

Robotic-assisted surgery (RAS) has transformed **urological oncology**, particularly **radical prostatectomy** and **partial nephrectomy**.

Blood loss & transfusion rates: Studies consistently show a **30–50% reduction in intraoperative blood loss** compared to open prostatectomy, lowering transfusion needs.

Functional recovery: While oncological outcomes (positive surgical margins) depend heavily on surgeon skill, RAS has been associated with earlier return of **continence** and, in some series, improved **erectile function**.

Renal preservation: In partial nephrectomy, robotic precision allows **tumor enucleation with minimal ischemia time**, preserving renal function better than open/laparoscopic approaches.

Gynecology: Hysterectomy and Complex Pelvic Surgery:

Gynecology represents one of the **largest adoption areas** for RAS.

Benign disease: For hysterectomies and myomectomies, robotic platforms can reduce **conversion to open surgery** when pelvic anatomy is distorted (e.g., by adhesions or large fibroids).

Oncology: In early endometrial cancer, RAS demonstrates similar survival and recurrence rates to laparoscopy, with reduced blood loss and shorter hospital stay.

Cervical cancer (LACC trial): However, randomized evidence showed minimally invasive (laparoscopic and robotic) radical hysterectomy associated with **worse oncologic outcomes** compared to open surgery, highlighting that **clinical context matters**.

Colorectal and Thoracic Surgery:

Evidence is more nuanced outside of pelvic surgery.

Colorectal cancer: Trials such as **ROLARR** found that robotic-assisted rectal resection did **not significantly outperform laparoscopy** in conversion rates or oncological margins. However, subanalyses suggested advantages in **male, obese, or narrow pelvis patients**, where technical constraints are higher.

Thoracic surgery: Robotic lobectomy and mediastinal surgery show comparable morbidity and mortality to video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS), but with enhanced dexterity for **lymph node dissection** and **challenging angles** in the chest cavity.

Oncologic equivalence: Long-term survival and recurrence data are still maturing; thus, **non-inferiority rather than superiority** is the current evidence standard.

Perioperative Outcomes and Hospital Metrics:

Length of stay (LOS): Across specialties, RAS reduces LOS by about **1–2 days** compared to open surgery, but differences versus laparoscopy are often marginal.

Pain and recovery: Patients generally report lower early postoperative pain and quicker return to normal activity, although robust quality-of-life (QoL) data remain limited.

Complication rates: RAS is typically equivalent to laparoscopy in terms of major complication rates but may reduce **minor wound complications** due to fewer or smaller incisions.

The Learning Curve Effect:

Clinical effectiveness is tightly linked to **surgeon experience**:

Operative time: Early in adoption, robotic cases often take longer than laparoscopy. After **20–50 indexed cases**, times approach or surpass laparoscopic benchmarks.

Complication reduction: Experienced surgeons demonstrate lower complication rates, more complete lymphadenectomy, and more consistent oncological margins.

Ergonomic advantage: Surgeons also experience reduced fatigue and musculoskeletal strain, which indirectly improves patient outcomes by sustaining precision over long cases.

Procedure Complexity & Case Selection:

The benefits of RAS become more evident in **technically demanding scenarios**:

Deep, narrow spaces (e.g., male pelvis, thoracic apex).

Complex reconstructions (e.g., intracorporeal urinary diversion after cystectomy).

Obese patients or those with multiple prior surgeries.

In straightforward cases (simple cholecystectomy, uncomplicated hysterectomy), robotic advantages may not justify costs, but in high-complexity procedures, RAS can **improve safety and reduce conversion rates**.

Robotic-assisted surgery demonstrates clear **short-term benefits in blood loss, LOS, and ergonomics**, particularly in **urology and gynecology**, with more nuanced outcomes in colorectal and thoracic fields. The **surgeon's learning curve** remains a dominant factor, meaning that effectiveness improves significantly with volume and experience. Long-term oncological outcomes continue to be studied, but current evidence supports **non-inferiority** to laparoscopy and open surgery across most indications.

Safety, Risk, and Human Factors:

Robotic-assisted surgery (RAS) offers technological precision but also introduces **new categories of risks**—both technical and human-centered. Ensuring patient safety requires recognizing these risks and implementing **systematic safeguards**.

Primary Risk Classes:

Access-Related Injuries & Energy Spread:

Trocars and entry points: Injuries may occur during **abdominal access** (e.g., bowel, bladder, or vascular damage during trocar placement).

Energy devices: Robotic monopolar/bipolar instruments can cause **thermal injury** through direct application, insulation failure, or capacitive coupling.

Limited tactile feedback: Unlike open surgery, robotic platforms traditionally lack haptics, which increases the reliance on vision to prevent tissue trauma.

Mitigation: Surgeons must follow **stepwise entry protocols**, use **low-voltage energy settings**, and monitor instrument integrity closely.

Device Faults and Failures:

Instrument wear: Robotic tools have a fixed lifespan (often 10 uses). Worn joints may fail intraoperatively.

Mechanical issues: Examples include **arm collisions, cable fraying, or instrument detachment**.

System malfunctions: Rare but serious risks include **loss of camera feed, console disconnection, or software errors**.

Mitigation: Preventive maintenance, **instrument usage tracking**, and backup laparoscopic instruments in the OR are essential. Most manufacturers also design **redundant safety interlocks** to prevent catastrophic events.

Human Factors: Cognitive Load & Communication:

Cognitive overload: The surgeon operates through a console, sometimes disconnected from team dynamics. Complex procedures, alarms, and multitasking can overwhelm attention.

Miscommunication: Console surgeons rely on bedside assistants to exchange instruments, suction, or retract tissues. Breakdowns in verbal commands can delay critical steps.

Loss of situational awareness: Sitting away from the patient may create detachment, leading to slower recognition of bleeding or anesthesia events.

Mitigation: Structured **team communication protocols**, like closed-loop communication, minimize ambiguity. OR design must ensure the surgeon maintains **visual and auditory connection** with the bedside team.

Mitigation Strategies:

WHO-Style Robotic "Time-Outs":

Before incision, teams conduct **robotic-specific safety checks**: docking plan, arm positioning, energy source verification, and backup plan in case of failure.

Pre-Case Docking Rehearsals:

Simulated **dry runs** of docking reduce delays and minimize risk of arm collision. This is especially important in multi-quadrant procedures (e.g., colorectal resections).

OR "Black Box" Reviews:

Inspired by aviation, surgical OR black boxes record **video, audio, and device data**. Postoperative reviews identify workflow errors, near misses, and communication breakdowns—feeding into **continuous quality improvement**.

Standardized Instrument Life Tracking:

Automated counters disable instruments after their safe-use limit. Hospitals should also conduct **quality checks of instruments pre- and post-case**.

Dual-Console Mentoring:

Newer systems allow **two surgeons** to share control. A mentor can take over instantly, reducing risk during trainee cases and accelerating skill acquisition safely.

Credentialing and Performance Oversight:

Procedure-specific credentialing: A surgeon credentialed in robotic prostatectomy may not automatically be approved for robotic colorectal resections.

Ongoing audits: Hospitals require periodic review of surgical logs, complication rates, and conversion statistics.

Simulation recertification: Surgeons may need to demonstrate proficiency on simulators to maintain privileges.

This ensures **sustained competency** rather than a one-time certification.

Incident Learning Systems:

Learning from errors is critical to improving safety:

Device logs: Capture real-time data (instrument angles, energy usage, console time) to identify causes of errors.

Video review: Post-case video allows teams to analyze technical errors and team dynamics.

Human-factors analysis: Identifies systemic causes like poor OR layout, unclear protocols, or fatigue, rather than blaming individuals.

These systems allow **feedback loops** that inform design improvements, refine training, and ultimately prevent recurrence of adverse events.

Broader Human-Factors Considerations:

Ergonomics: While consoles reduce surgeon strain, bedside assistants may face awkward instrument exchanges—training must address **all team members**, not just console surgeons.

Alarm fatigue: Robotic systems generate multiple alerts. Poorly prioritized alarms can desensitize teams; designing **smart, context-aware alarms** is vital.

Team hierarchy: The separation of console surgeon from the sterile field can create hierarchical barriers. Encouraging **egalitarian communication** (everyone empowered to speak up) enhances patient safety.

Safety in robotic-assisted surgery depends on a **holistic approach**: combining **technology safeguards** (fault detection, interlocks, black box monitoring) with **human-factor strategies** (team communication, credentialing, simulation). As robots become more complex—with AI, automation, and remote capabilities—the importance of **structured human–machine–team integration** will only increase.

Economics, Access & Implementation:

Robotic-assisted surgery (RAS) is not only a clinical innovation but also a **major economic investment** for hospitals and health systems. Cost and access remain among the most debated dimensions of robotic adoption.

Cost-Effectiveness and Financial Structure:

Capital and Service Costs:

Acquisition costs: Surgical robots can cost **$1–2.5 million** upfront, with annual service contracts reaching **$100,000–200,000**.

Maintenance: Preventive maintenance and system calibration add recurring expenses.

Amortization: Cost-effectiveness depends on distributing these expenses over a **large case volume**.

Consumables and Instruments:

Robotic instruments have **limited lifespans** (e.g., 10 uses). Hospitals must replace them regularly, adding significant per-case costs.

Proprietary instrument pricing limits competition, though **emerging open-platform systems** may lower costs in the future.

Operating Room Time and Efficiency:

Turnover time: Early in adoption, robotic cases may increase OR time, but as staff become proficient, room time decreases.

Standardized trays and checklists reduce unnecessary instrument use, cutting down sterilization and preparation costs.

Case Volume and Utilization:

RAS economics are highly **volume-dependent**:

High-volume centers (>300–400 cases/year): Spread fixed costs across many cases, often achieving cost neutrality or savings through reduced complications and readmissions.

Low-volume centers: Struggle with cost recovery, as fixed costs remain high while utilization is low.

Strategic indication selection improves value—for example, prioritizing procedures where robotic precision reduces costly complications (e.g., radical prostatectomy, rectal cancer resection).

Access Challenges in LMICs:

Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face barriers due to **capital intensity and maintenance requirements**. Innovative strategies include:

Hub-and-spoke models: Central high-volume hospitals act as "hubs," serving multiple smaller centers.

Shared platforms: Regional consortia pool resources to purchase and share robotic systems.

Biomedical engineering partnerships: Local engineers trained for **in-country maintenance** reduce dependency on costly foreign technicians.

Tele-mentoring and training networks: Remote support allows LMIC centers to build expertise without sending surgeons abroad.

These approaches reduce **total cost of ownership** and broaden equitable access.

Equity and Ethical Considerations:

RAS can unintentionally widen disparities if only wealthy patients or hospitals can access it. Equity requires:

Transparent case selection: Clear criteria for when RAS is offered, ensuring patients are not excluded by socioeconomic status alone.

Patient information materials: Patients should understand both the benefits and limitations of robotic surgery, avoiding misconceptions that "robotic" automatically means "better."

Outcomes reporting: Hospitals should publish **data on complication rates, conversions, and long-term outcomes**, making robotic programs accountable to patients and payers.

Insurance and reimbursement policies: Equitable access depends on coverage models. Some payers classify RAS as "experimental" in certain indications, affecting affordability.

Implementation Strategies:

For successful integration of RAS into healthcare systems:

Phased implementation: Start with high-value procedures before expanding indications.

Training & staff engagement: Teams must be trained in **robotic workflows, troubleshooting, and safety checks** to avoid inefficiencies.

Cross-specialty collaboration: A single robot serving multiple specialties (urology, gynecology, colorectal) improves utilization rates.

Data-driven monitoring: Hospitals should track outcomes, OR time, instrument usage, and costs continuously to adjust practice and pricing.

The economics of robotic surgery balance **high upfront investment** against potential **long-term efficiency and outcome gains**. High-volume, multidisciplinary centers achieve the best value, while LMICs can adopt creative models (hub-and-spoke, shared platforms) to reduce costs. Ensuring **equitable access** requires transparency, fair patient selection, and rigorous outcomes reporting. Ultimately, successful implementation depends on aligning financial planning with **clinical effectiveness and ethical responsibility**.

Future Directions in Robotic-Assisted Surgery:

The next decade of surgical robotics will be shaped by **digital convergence, smarter automation, connectivity, and data ecosystems**. While the first generation of systems enhanced dexterity and visualization, the future will expand into **intelligent, networked platforms** that both support surgeons and learn from global surgical experience.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning Integration:

Automated Camera Control: AI can track instruments and anatomy, autonomously adjusting camera angles to maintain optimal field of view—reducing reliance on bedside assistants.

Anatomy Segmentation & Recognition: Deep learning algorithms can identify vessels, nerves, or tumor margins in real time, providing visual overlays that guide safer dissections.

Skill Assessment & Feedback: AI-driven analytics can evaluate surgeon performance by measuring metrics like instrument path smoothness, applied force, or time-efficiency—enabling **objective credentialing** and **personalized training feedback**.

Context-Aware Safety Limits: Intelligent software may restrict risky movements (e.g., approaching vital vessels) or provide real-time alerts, functioning as an **"autopilot safety net"**.

Implication: AI-enhanced robotics could standardize surgical quality by reducing variability between novice and expert surgeons.

Connectivity, 5G, and Edge Computing:

Tele-Mentoring: Surgeons in low-resource or remote areas could receive **real-time guidance** from experts abroad with minimal latency.

Telesurgery: Fully remote operations, pioneered in the early "Lindbergh operation," may become practical with 5G and edge computing. These systems will require:

Fail-safe designs (instantaneous handover to local team in case of signal loss).

Redundant communication pathways (fiber + satellite backup).

Medico-legal frameworks clarifying surgeon responsibility across jurisdictions.

Distributed Data Processing: Edge computing reduces latency by processing data locally, enabling **faster AI-driven decisions** during surgery.

Implication: Connectivity can democratize surgical expertise, bringing advanced care to underserved populations worldwide.

Augmented Reality (AR) and Enhanced Imaging:

AR Overlays: Anatomical roadmaps, tumor margins, or vascular structures could be projected directly onto the surgeon's console display, guiding precise dissection.

Fluorescence Imaging: Advanced dyes (beyond indocyanine green) can visualize lymphatics, perfusion, or tumor tissue in real time.

Force-Inference Algorithms: Since robotic systems often lack true haptics, algorithms combining **visual deformation analysis + instrument feedback** can estimate tissue resistance, mimicking tactile sensation.

Implication: Multi-modal visualization reduces the risk of injuring critical structures and enhances surgical confidence.

Data Ecosystems, Registries, and Post-Market Surveillance:

Standardized Data Models: For meaningful analytics, robotic systems must record structured, anonymized data across procedures, platforms, and hospitals.

Registries: International databases (similar to cardiac stent or arthroplasty registries) will track robotic outcomes, complications, and device performance.

Privacy-Preserving Design: To build trust, systems must embed **encryption, anonymization, and federated learning**—ensuring hospitals contribute data without exposing patient identity.

Continuous Learning Health Systems: Outcomes data feed back into AI algorithms, driving iterative improvements in surgical safety and performance.

Implication: RAS will evolve into a **learning ecosystem**, where every surgery globally contributes to improving the next.

Next-Generation Robotics: Miniaturization and Automation:

Miniaturized Robots: Flexible robotic platforms (e.g., snake-like or capsule robots) could operate in **natural orifices** or within **tiny anatomical spaces** without large incisions.

Soft Robotics: Bio-inspired designs may provide gentler manipulation, reducing tissue trauma.

Autonomous Subtasks: Robots may eventually perform **routine actions autonomously**—such as suturing, stapling, or camera repositioning—under surgeon supervision.

Hybrid Human–Machine Collaboration: Surgeons will increasingly act as **strategic supervisors**, focusing on complex decisions while robots execute standardized maneuvers.

Implication: Over time, robotic platforms may transition from assistive tools to **collaborative partners**.

Policy, Regulation, and Ethical Horizons:

Regulatory Science: Authorities must define approval pathways for **AI-driven surgical functions**—balancing innovation with patient safety.

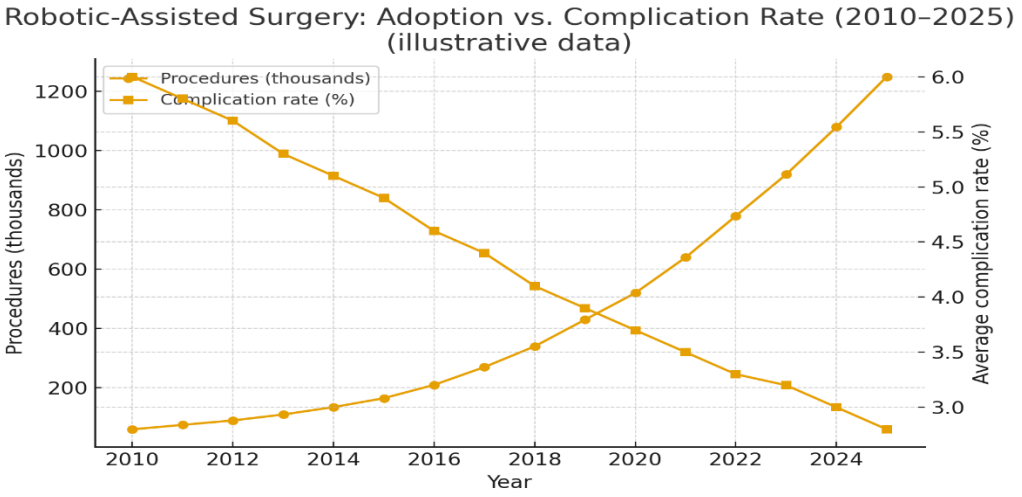
Ethics of Automation: The shift toward semi-autonomous tasks raises questions about **surgeon accountability**.

Equity: Global initiatives must ensure that AI-enhanced robotics do not remain limited to wealthy hospitals, but also reach low- and middle-income countries.

Liability: Telesurgery introduces cross-border medico-legal challenges, requiring international standards.

Implication: Governance will determine whether the technology becomes a global equalizer or deepens disparities.

The future of robotic-assisted surgery lies in the convergence of **AI, AR, 5G connectivity, soft robotics, and global data ecosystems**. These advancements promise to improve **precision, safety, and accessibility**, while simultaneously raising new questions around **regulation, ethics, and equity**. If implemented responsibly, the next generation of robotic systems will not just replicate the surgeon's hand—it will extend surgical capability into a new era of **intelligent, connected, and globally shared healthcare**.



Summary:

Robotic platforms can enhance precision, ergonomics, and reproducibility in minimally invasive surgery, but clinical superiority is procedure- and context-dependent. Safe, cost-effective adoption rests on rigorous training, human-factors-aware workflows, and honest measurement of outcomes and costs. Next-generation capabilities—AI assistance, AR, and telepresence—could broaden indications and reduce variation, provided that governance, equity, and evidence keep pace.

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