



Top Doctors 2010

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Dr. Robert Carey remembers the prostate cancer patient who volunteered for Carey's first-ever da Vinci robotic surgery.

Dr. Robert Carey is something of an anomaly in the medical profession. A board-certified urologic surgeon, he also holds a Ph.D. in chemistry from M.I.T. and has been working with technology his whole life. In 2006, as one of the few surgeons statewide to master the state-of-the-art da Vinci robotic surgery system, Carey was recruited by Sarasota Memorial Hospital to offer the high-tech, laparoscopic prostate cancer treatment locally. While the robotics system has shaped his career, the doctor remains most inspired by the people he treats—especially the patient who volunteered for Carey's first-ever da Vinci surgery.

"I was fortunate to have access at the University of Miami to one of the first [da Vinci] systems that came out," Carey remembers. "I spent extraordinary time in the lab carefully learning how to tie surgical knots, how to do surgical dissections, how to apply the robot to a specific operation for prostate cancer. It was years of my personal development with that system before I ever operated on a human."

Carey remembers that first surgery "like it was yesterday," he says. "I remember the courage of that patient. It was a local doctor with high-grade, high-risk cancer; he trusted me. And, he said, 'Probably no one else wants to be first.'"

The surgeon's attitude going in? Cautious optimism. "If you didn't think you were going to do a better job [than traditional surgery], you wouldn't be doing it," he says. "But it's sort of like when you send a man to the moon: You can prepare in Houston and Cape Canaveral all you want, but the astronaut's perspective is going to be unique."

The procedure was a definitive success, removing the cancerous prostate with less blood loss and a much faster recovery than traditional surgery. "By the time I finished, I knew I would never go back to open surgery," says Carey. "A new era of surgery was upon us."

The patient was able to leave the hospital the next day. Seven years later, Carey still keeps in touch with him.

"The fact that another physician volunteered to be the first case, it shows you something of humanity," says Carey. "This was someone who truly knew what a big deal this was." —*Hannah Wallace*