



Texas Medical Center hotel employs germ-killing robots to fight coronavirus

The door to the hotel room shuts and Zena the robot raises what looks like a domed head and begins emitting intense bursts of light. A couple minutes later, the room is sanitized, disinfected and ready for its next guest.

As the coronavirus continues to spread around the world and in the Houston area, the owner of a new hotel in the Texas Medical Center has purchased two of these germ-fighting cleaning robots from a San Antonio-based company founded in 2008 to serve hospitals and health care facilities that are constantly battling pathogens in their patient rooms, operating rooms and elsewhere.

The robots use pulses of high-intensity ultraviolet light to damage the DNA of bacteria and viruses that may be living on surfaces such as hospital beds and medical equipment, or in a hotel's case, remote controls, bathroom countertops or coffee pods. The light is so bright, people aren't allowed in the same room with the robot while it's in use.

The 150-pound machines, priced at \$100,000 each, are being used at The Westin Houston Medical Center, which opened in December. Houston-based Pearl Hospitality, which owns and operates the hotel, recently acquired the robots from manufacturer Xenex Disinfectant Services.

The robots, which operate for two-minute cycles in the hotel's bedrooms, bathrooms and suites, are being used between guest stays. They are also being used throughout other parts of the 273-room property, including the restaurant and lounge, lobby and staff areas.

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The machines are used after manual cleaning as an extra layer of protection. They use pulsed xenon, a noble gas, to create broad-spectrum UV light.

Pearl came across Xenex's robots while searching online for hospital-grade disinfectants as cases of COVID-19 were becoming more widespread.

"I said let's add another layer of protection to create a safer place," Archit Sanghvi, vice president of operations for Pearl, said Wednesday.

Xenex has sold 1,200 of its robots to more than 500 hospitals, including MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. In the health care industry, the company competes with makers of mercury vapor-based systems.

This is Xenex's first venture outside the health care world, said Sarah Simmons, the company's senior director of science.

The company has started marketing its robots to pharmaceutical manufacturers and long-term care health centers, similar to the nursing care facility in suburban Seattle where there have been multiple cases of COVID-19.

“We’d love also to get be able to get into cruise ships,” Simmons said. “This is the perfect demonstration of why disinfection of cruise ships needs to be more robust than it is right now.”

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Xenex, which calls its patented machines LightStrike Germ-Zapping Robots, has received multiple rounds of venture funding, including a \$38 million round led by Essex Woodlands, a health care private equity firm. Piper Jaffray Merchant Banking, Malin Corp. and Tectonic Ventures also invested.

In addition to the robots, Pearl is implementing other new cleaning protocols at the Westin. One of them is placing all room amenities, including bath products, coffee and tea and remote controls into sealed plastic bags after they are disinfected. Other non-essential items like magazines and decorative pillows are being removed.

Located at 1709 Dryden, surrounded by Houston’s largest hospitals, the Westin largely caters to patients receiving treatments, researchers and health care providers. However, the hotel, along with many others, has seen business slow as companies cut corporate travel as the coronavirus spreads and conferences are called off or postponed.

The largest cancellation at the Westin was the Texas Salsa Congress, a Latinx dance and culture event scheduled to take place there from March 12-15. Some 200 attendees were expected at the group’s 16th annual event.

“A lot of corporate travel has slowed down,” Sanghvi said, “but the business of medicine has to continue.”

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