BAETS TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP REPORT

FINDING HUMANITY IN ROBOTIC SURGERY

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The first robot I encountered in Seoul was not in an operating theatre but politely trundling down a hospital corridor. Meet CLOi (*pronounced KLOH-ee*), the autonomous delivery robot that ferries chemotherapy medications and specimens around Severance Hospital, occasionally pausing for a selfie. By taking on routine transport tasks, she frees nurses and porters to remain where they matter most: by the patients' side. In a centre renowned for its extensive robotic surgical programme, this felt like an unexpectedly poetic introduction to my observership. Here, robots are designed to protect humanity, not replace it.

The Younsei Cancer Centre in Seoul is prestigious, busy, and remarkably coordinated. Clinic efficiency is immediately striking, with forty patients reviewed in a single morning clinic. Dedicated nurses discretely requested investigations and organised future appointments, freeing the clinician to focus on the patient. Each patient left with clear written instruction and confirmed follow-up dates. In Korea, clarity and predictability are forms of respect, rendering this workflow not just efficient but culturally attuned.



The operating theatre ran with the same disciplined coordination. Over a decade of experience has forged a team fluent with the nuance of remote access surgery. ENT robotic lists run daily, with dual-console theatres and full robotic simulation centres to train the next generation of surgeons. Innovation was everywhere. The surgical team have engineered their own instruments from custom connectors which allow nerve monitoring during robotic cases to a novel dressing that replaces the traditional drain stitch. Yet, amid the technical sophistication, I found equal joy in picking up simple surgical pearls, proving fundamentals still matter even in high-tech environments.

I had assumed patients chose robotic thyroidectomy primarily to avoid a scar, but my mentor quickly reframed this: their priority is selecting the best operation. She explained preserving body image in thyroid surgery is not superficial vanity. Here, it resonates deeply with cultural identity and may influence a patient's confidence to seek treatment. The technical benefits were undeniable; the magnified view provided unparalleled detail, making parathyroids easier to identify and preserve.



Beyond the hospital walls, Korean culture offered another insight. Tipping is neither expected nor encouraged, because good service is viewed as the baseline. In healthcare, this philosophy resonated deeply. The care I observed was attentive and meticulous, driven by professional pride rather than external reward.

I am truly grateful to BAETS for this privileged opportunity, and I'm astounded by how much I learned. This experience showed me that technology need not distance clinicians from patients, but instead can safeguard the time, attention and outcomes which matter most. The robot may assist the hands, but it is humanity that guides the care.