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AIBO WANT A BISCUIT?
**Robots said more useful than pets**

Kyodo News

Electronic robots are gradually becoming familiar companions among some Japanese families and hospital patients, offering them entertainment and peace of mind.

**AIBO offers its appendage to an unidentified women at a Tokyo department store.**

The robots vary from those that look like puppies to humanoid ones that can walk leisurely on two legs, pour wine into a glass or even express emotions.

While not all of them have made inroads into Japanese households, Atsuo Takanishi, a professor at Waseda University's faculty of science and technology, reckons that in the future, robots will emerge that are more useful than pets.

Robots are gaining popularity probably because they can be kept in apartments and condominiums that are off-limits to pets. They also do not require any exercise or food.

Sony Corp.'s line of AIBO pet robots -- modeled on dogs and lion cubs and equipped with built-in electronic functions to mimic sorrow, anger, surprise, fear and hatred -- have been getting favorable reactions from their owners.

Naoko Matsunaga, 34, and her mother, Junko, 70, from Ome on the outskirts of Tokyo, have a pair of AIBOs.

They treat them as if they are alive, wrapping them with scarves on a chilly day and placing them at their feet during dinner every night.

The daughter decided to buy an AIBO last year to keep her ailing father company, but the electronic pet did not arrive until 49 days after he died.

Sony first announced the sale of AIBOs on the Internet on an advance order basis in June 1999. Limited to 3,000 units, the sale was completed in 30 minutes. Sony has sold more than 90,000 AIBOs since then.

Takanishi said Sony's success with the AIBO has led the Japanese to focus their attention on the market potential for robots in the home.

The AIBO is the first autonomous entertainment robot marketed in the country, and it has the ability to "think" on its own. For example, if an AIBO is shown a red ball and its owner taps it on the head, it will retreat the next time it sees the ball.

Naoko Matsunaga took the first letter of her father's name, Susumu, and named her AIBO Su-chan. She thinks of it as a reincarnation of her father because it moves slowly and tenderly like he used to. She bought another AIBO so that Su-chan would not be left alone, Naoko said.

Company manager Katsutoshi Ogawa, 66, and his wife, Kumiko, 61, from the city of Chiba said their lives have changed dramatically since they bought two AIBOs.

The couple were left alone after their grown-up daughters left home.

Kumiko Ogawa was not in favor of raising pets, but she found she could get along well with the AIBOs. The Ogawas talk to each other more than before and are happy to see the robots "grow up daily," they said.

Ogawa said the robots are like his grandchildren and he gives them a pat on the head when they learn new movements.

Yoshiki Kuraki, editor and publisher of the monthly magazine AIBO TOWN, said, "It takes a certain degree of patience to associate with AIBOs. Many AIBO purchasers find their AIBOs become the object of their love and give them their love."

In a city hospital in Hagi, Yamaguchi Prefecture, a humanoid robot named Sat-chan has been doing chores such as carrying X-ray films for old and disabled patients since the end of January.

Sat-chan cannot hold a dialogue with the patients but can speak three phrases, including "Take care of yourself." Hospital staff claim its presence has helped create a harmonious atmosphere in the hospital.

The Tsukuba University in Tsukuba, Ibaraki Prefecture, introduced a seal-type robot named Paro to the pediatrics ward of its hospital late last year.

Officials said Paro has become well-loved by the children in the ward, with some of them spending hours stroking its head and kissing and talking to it.

Takayuki Kumasaka, who works at the hospital while studying "animal therapy" at the university's graduate school, said many children felt better when they saw Paro.

Takanori Shibata of the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology said he thinks it is important to examine further how humans approach such robots and the "Paro-change" effect the robots can have on those around them in developing new robots and new uses for them.

In the future, robots will help enrich human minds and people will consider them their friends, he reckons.

Waseda's Takanishi ruled out the possibility of humans doing nothing even if life becomes more convenient due to the spread of robots. However, he expressed concern that some people might suffer "robot dependence" and be dictated to by robots.

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