

'Avatar doctor' is coming, physician-author says

February 19 2014, by Rob Lever



Author Robin Cook signs copies of his new book "Cell" at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC on February 19, 2014

It's just in fiction for now, but the "avatar doctor," a virtual physician which consults and diagnoses through a smartphone app, is coming, says the author of a new medical thriller.

Robin Cook, a physician and best-selling author known for his books

"Coma" and "Outbreak," says his new novel, "Cell," foretells a future where a good deal of medicine can come through an app which can draw from huge medical databases.

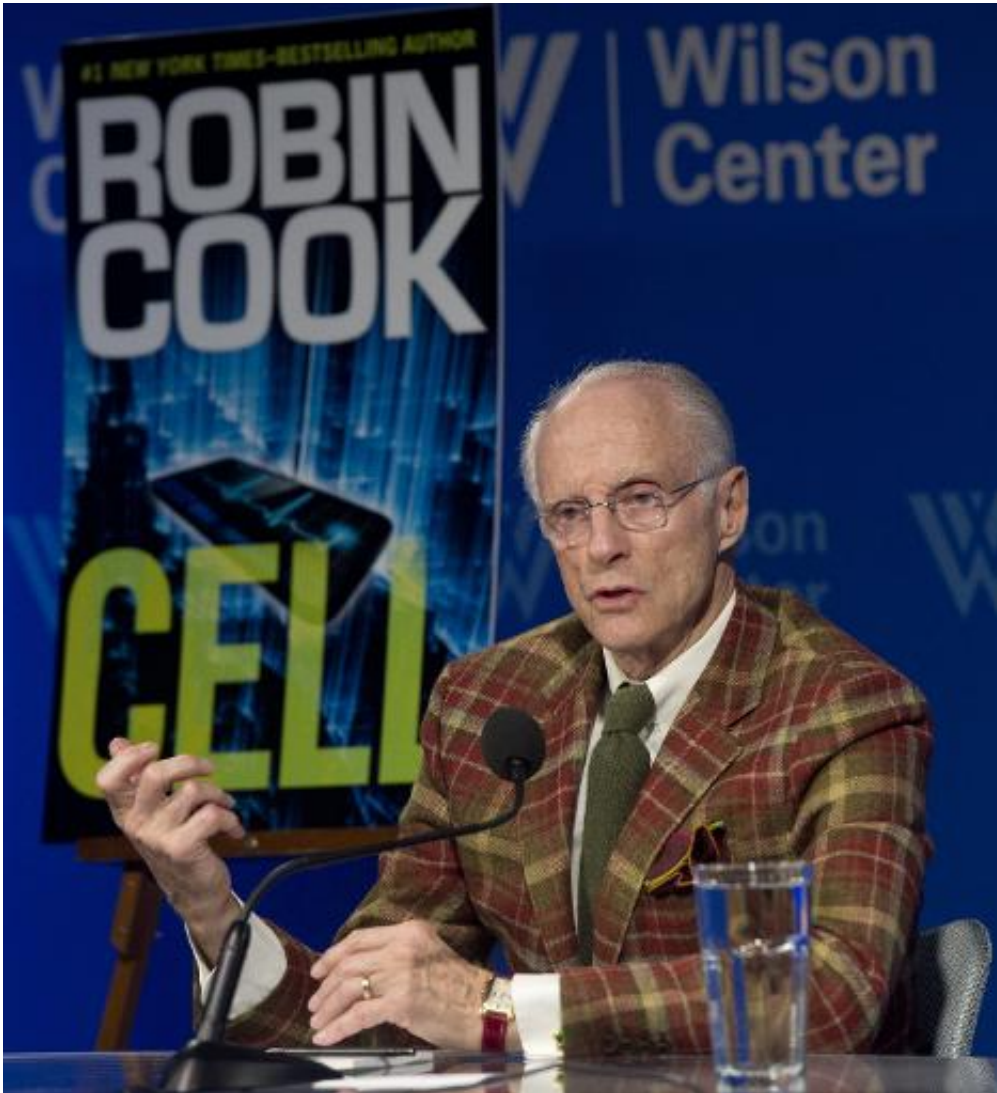
"Just about every book I have written has come to pass," Cook told a symposium Wednesday at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington as part of his book launch.

"There are already 50,000 medical apps. If you put them together you can have an avatar doctor. And it's going to be pretty darn good."

Cook, who has training in surgery and ophthalmology, said the virtual doctor can be superior in many ways to real-life [medical practitioners](#) by being able to sift through billions of studies and records to make a diagnosis and offer a solution.

"It's going to be updated on a daily basis," he said. "We're going to have something that can solve the biggest problems in American health care—and health care in the world."

Cook said that by using an avatar doctor such as the "iDoc" described in his new book, which launched February 4, patients will be able to have more access to care and have more control over their treatment.



Author Robin Cook discusses his new book "Cell" at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC on February 19, 2014

"It's going to democratize medicine," he said. "We have been held hostage by the stakeholders—the physicians, big pharma, device makers and medical labs. This is going to free us from that."

Cook said the use of a doctor app—which can connect to heart monitors, blood analyses and other data—has the potential to reduce unneeded

hospital visits or specialist consultations by determining which symptoms suggest real problems and which don't.

"If you think you are having a heart attack, your avatar doctor will look at your EKG, it will know your breathing rate," he said. "It might tell you to go back to sleep."

An app can also reduce the use of ineffective medicines by analyzing genetics and the likely response to various drugs.

"Some people feel you would lose the human touch and that people are not going to accept this. I disagree," he said. "Access and availability are going to trump the human touch."

A medical app with continuous monitoring can also be more effective in helping people quit addictions and predicting problems such as heart attacks, he argued.

As for the plot of "Cell," which revolves around an [app](#) which runs amok under the control of an evil insurance company, Cook said that was a way to create suspense and make the story more entertaining.

"Personally, I think this will be a big benefit to mankind," he said of the prospect of virtual doctors. "But there will be bumps in the road."

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Citation: 'Avatar doctor' is coming, physician-author says (2014, February 19) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-avatar-doctor-physician-author.html>

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