

AGEING AND TECHNOLOGIES

Creating a vision of care in times of digitization

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Executive summary

The global population is ageing, and with it the demand for health and social care. However, the number of people working in the sector is not keeping pace with the change, and the people who have traditionally provided informal and voluntary care are under increasing pressure.

This growing gap between need and resources presents a real challenge to countries in Europe and beyond, and all are seeking care and support arrangements that are better adapted and prepared for the future. Some people believe that digital technologies can contribute to the solution, but others are more sceptical, believing that practical and ethical challenges are too great.

Technological innovations will certainly not solve all the challenges in the area of ageing and care, but there is evidence from research and practice that they can make a real contribution. However, it is still rare to find good matches between the technology and needs, and many potentially useful technical solutions do not find their way to those who could benefit.

There are many reasons for this. Expectations are often unrealistic; the range of products and services is too complex and diverse for people to have a clear overview; appropriate infrastructure (and especially broadband coverage) is often inadequate; and research and development projects sometimes focus more on “selling” a technology than understanding what care recipients and carers might need or prefer. There is a clear need for better information for users on the options, their costs and benefits, and there is also relatively little accessible research into the level and nature of technology use and its social impact.

This is the report of a project which investigated these issues across a range of European countries. It aimed to begin with the needs of older people, rather than with the technology. To achieve this, it defined a vision of what good care for older people (embracing both social and health care) would look like, before considering what digital technologies might (or might not) contribute to achieving this.

The overall vision is of good care as the range of services which enable older people and their carers to maintain good later life as they understand it, recognising the great diversity of older people. As a framework for analysing the relevance of the technologies, we took the rights defined in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, which apply as much to those in need of care as to the rest of the population.

The project established clearly that a common international approach to this topic is possible. The reasons for success or failure of technologies in care are comparable if not the same in the participating countries, and all the national policy pointers follow a similar direction.

Policy should begin with what older people and their carers (both formal and informal) believe is good care, taking into account international human rights standards. The following policy pointers are designed to lead to this:

- Policy needs to focus more on what role technology can play in securing good care, and less on ways of applying the technology to people.

- Strategies for the introduction and implementation of technology in health and social care need to be integrated with other relevant national frameworks (including frameworks and policies for care, health, digitisation, and other issues).
- Policy development in this field should engage with a wider range of societal actors.
- Digital literacy should be systematically integrated into the basic training and further education of caregivers, both formal and informal.
- A national or European strategy is needed to provide independent and impartial evaluation of technologies available, their costs and benefits, to assist those in need of care, their carers and the managers of care systems and institutions.
- There is a need for strategies to improve the interaction between older people in need of care, informal and formal caregivers, service providers, technology companies.

This report is not primarily about technology, but about the lives of older people and their carers. The vision of good later life should inform all development, and innovation should be undertaken in partnership with older people themselves. We hope that this report will help towards achieving this.