

# Tech and Seniors - Changing Times

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I have worked in family medicine with a focused practice in care of the elderly for almost 25 years. As a result, I have seen a lot of changes in care, but I have seen even more changes in the people I am caring for. The only time I have been quoted in the *Globe & Mail* (much to my mother-in-law's delight) was my comment that the era of the unengaged older patient is ending. The current group of "geriatric patients" has much less interest in being told what to do by their doctor, or dropping their interests and connections because of aging.

Technology is often thought of as being a dark continent for seniors, and, like learning other new skills, mastering new technologies takes longer as we get older. However, things that would've been unusual even 5 years ago are now commonplace. When admitting an older person to my geriatric rehabilitation unit, patients often ask me for the wi-fi pass word. It is common for octogenarians to mention that they are going to be Skyping with their granddaughter in Australia to update them on their rehabilitation.

Aging is the time when there is potential for isolation and disengagement. The new generation of seniors is making use of the opportunities that technology provides to minimize this risk. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media can help older people stay in touch with friends, family and remain engaged with their interests. The development of social media designed for seniors is a focus for Silicon Valley startups, and one hopes that they get lots of advice from older people in development.

There are some downsides to social media for seniors. Although bullying on social media is less likely to be an issue for seniors, I would hate to see the opportunities for face-to-face interactions and real contact with people decreased because an electronic option was available. As the keepers of wisdom and tradition, I also hope that seniors do not "dumb down" the way that they read literature, and engage with the world.

In addition to connecting seniors with others, technology has potential benefits in assisting people to remain at home as safely as possible. Assistive Technology (AT) has the potential to change the way we care for people at home, especially in a country like Canada where children may be living thousands of miles away. We are a ways away from robot assistants helping people with dementia stay at home but there are some very interesting approaches that are being taken. For example, remote monitoring of medical conditions including vital signs and blood sugar measurements can be helpful in avoiding hospitalization. The use of videoconferencing can be relevant in saving travel time for medical appointments, and can be particularly helpful in rural and isolated areas with limited access to health professionals. The "Smart home" will be able to track movements to identify when somebody has fallen and to help guide the management of behavioural disturbances.

One of the most difficult aspects of having dementia is the loss of the driver's license due to medical suspension and the self-driving car may offer options in the future. As the technology and the legislation evolve, it will be important to consider how they can help people with mild dementia remain independent on the road.

As the world ages, there is increasing recognition that without the application of technology, we will be hard pressed to meet the needs of older patients. There is also increasing recognition that this is a large group of people and that it is financially beneficial for companies to offer services to this population. As mentioned, seniors have not been viewed as being the target of technology development but the rules of the game are

changing rapidly. Family physicians can help facilitate the appropriate use of technology, while ensuring that true human contact is optimized too. The ideal state is a combination of the modern, and the old-fashioned.