Life under COVID-19 – Opportunities and challenges for AgeTech

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Purpose COVID-19 has highlighted the issue of isolated seniors living in our communities. Social distancing and face-to-face contact were implemented in most countries to restrict infection, particularly amongst older people where the risk of developing severe complications and subsequent mortality is much higher. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, about 25% of older adults in Canada experienced social isolation (National Seniors Council, 2016). Social isolation can lead to stress, depression, cognitive decline and can affect physical health. COVID-19 has also sharpened our focus on technology as a potential solution for helping to support seniors remotely - helping to connect people at a time of disconnection. We are also seeing increasing awareness of the importance of technology amongst older people themselves. A poll commissioned by the AGE-WELL Network (n.d.) found that most older Canadians thought that technology can help older adults live independently, stay active and healthy, and reduce social isolation. As Canada's AgeTech network, AGE-WELL aimed to rapidly provide information and insights into the real-world impact and experiences of living under COVID-19 restrictions. These insights could then be used to ensure that older adults and caregivers themselves would drive research and technology responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. **Method** The members of AGE-WELL's Older Adults and Caregivers group were asked to create personas and scenarios (P&S) to illustrate the problems and experience of seniors across eight key "Challenge Areas": supportive homes and communities, health care and health service delivery, autonomy and independence, cognitive health and dementia, mobility and transportation, healthy lifestyles, staying connected, and financial wellness. A P&S is a semi-fictional account that describes a person, a situation or problem, and potential responses to problems. This is a well-established method used in business and IT to help developers to visualize real-world end-users and problems. **Results and Discussion** While protecting the health and safety of older people remains paramount, an overarching concern is how to work with and build on the capabilities of older adults to alleviate the social isolation experienced by many in that population. Technology-based products, services and apps offer many possibilities across all the key challenge areas to help older people to remain connected at a time of disconnection. However, it is important to recognise the limitations of remote technologies. Remote social interaction lacks the "human touch" of face to face contact, while accessing and using technology remains a significant barrier for many older adults, especially those who are the most cognitive and physically frail.

References

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