

Policy developments in ICT and AI-based care services for Korean older people living alone

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Purpose South Korea is one of the fastest-aging countries in the world: Individuals aged 65 or older will make up almost 20 percent of the total population by 2026. Among senior citizens 65 or older, 8.8% live by themselves. This figure is expected to double in 2035 (National Statistical Office, 2018). Since 2008, the Korean government has provided ICT-based emergency alarm systems for low-income elderly living alone. Private companies – including telecommunications businesses – also started providing AI-based care services for lone elders. This research delineates the characteristics of Korean policies with respect to ICT and AI-based care services for older people. **Method** Policy documents released by the Ministry of Health and Welfare and other public agencies during the past five years were analyzed to crystallize the developments of government-supported ICT-based care services for low-income elders living alone. The acceptability and usability of the services were qualitatively analyzed with interview data from elders using ICT and AI-based care services as well as their service providers. The data were collected during October–November 2018 in two Korean cities. **Results and Discussion** In 2017, a Presidential Committee on the 4th Industrial Revolution was created. The ‘i-KOREA 4.0 Plan’ for human-centered innovations and growth was announced in the same year, promoting the support of smart welfare projects aimed to develop and utilize ICT-/AI-based devices and systems for eldercare, and also to foster their independence, safety, social connectedness as well as aging in place (Consortium of Ministries, 2017). Recently, a new national plan for lone elders was additionally introduced, including more ICT-based services. Policy frameworks and directions set by the Korean government have provided a basis for the rapid expansion of digital care, especially in public sectors. However, older people experience difficulties in using the devices on their own and they need continued support from service providers after system installations. Results of the interview data analyses indicate that AI-equipped speakers function well in social companionship, whereas emergency alarm systems provide a sense of both guardianship and safety. These functionalities as well as issues of service design related to acceptability and usability have not been adequately addressed in the scrutinized Korean policies.

References

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