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GERONTECHNOLOGY TO SUSTAIN CAREGIVER WELL-BEING

Most probably, applications of modern technologies in 'support of informal caregivers'¹ will gain increased attention and development among eldercare professionals. If so, growing numbers of families will be served with quality long-term care in the least restrictive environments of their choice.

Longevity is rising globally among older people with single and often multiple needs. Many have dispersed, distant, and busy working families. How to use various technologies to provide usable information and support for millions of 'informal or unpaid caregivers? These are often family, friends and neighbors who provide the bulk of needed caregiving, including learning how to set up and monitor medical equipment, lift patients without damage to their own body, and many other tasks.

This short summary selects a few recent studies that demonstrate the utility and acceptance of technologies that aid in long-term care, and also provide support for the caregiver. Both patient and caregiver (often an older adult also) deserve appro-

appropriate technologies to maintain medical and quality of life goals.

Providing 'support' for informal caregivers involves a combination of informational and emotional understanding, using communication systems and home devices. For example, Internet forums have exploded in popularity, and these are not trivial chatter when it comes to finding support online. Many are used for quality information as well.

One study² provided a detailed analysis of Internet communications within a caregiving group. The results, both qualitative and quantitative, point to the value of the Internet in providing support of many varieties of informal caregiving issues, even among strangers talking together asynchronously and miles apart. The particular value of the 'large group' available online is cited in the study, because it provides multiple points of view suitable for the complexity and ever-changing demands of family and home caregiving situations. Another factor is the human 'connection' that busy individuals sense via Internet communications, not a minor factor when one has no one else to listen and understand closer

to home. Additionally, the 'anonymity' of stranger communications can add to the utility of discussions online, where one may be freer to share concerns, compared to closer family and associates where other everyday ties may interfere with full expression of stress or with admitting ignorance about medical concerns.

A different team of researchers has published several articles about a project called WIN (Worker Interactive Networking), also an information and support system online, with the added dimension of using home telemedicine technologies³. Working family caregivers in this study received free access to an online caregiver support group as well as information from a remote monitoring system at home with the elder, for six months. Findings report positive measures of "... worker morale, productivity, and reduction of caregiver stress. Participants found it easy to learn and use. Elders did not find the technology intrusive...(and) contrary to ...expectations, managers reported no abuse of Internet access."

Videophone, DVD, and telephone information and support continue to be cited as useful tools for caregivers at a distance⁴⁻⁵. These studies both report the enhancement of the informal caregiving experience (less worry and distress) when including these technologies for caregiver training and personal support. Utility of home medical monitoring systems is too large an area for review here. However, the 'relief' to the informal caregiver from home telemedicine is not often cited in those studies, if it is even considered. One hopes that immediate and

future planning recognizes the interaction of physical and emotional factors for sustaining well-being in caregivers over the long term⁶.

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