Creating the evidence

A new project is investigating how to best use technologies such as virtual reality and social robots to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of aged care recipients. NATASHA EGAN reports.

There has been increasing interest in the media recently about the use of virtual reality and other new technologies in aged care, says Dr Jenny Waycott, a senior lecturer and ARC Future Fellow at the University of Melbourne.

However, Waycott says she couldn't see a lot of academic research being done in the area.

“It felt like the technology was being deployed rapidly without the research there to determine exactly what it was about the technology that was beneficial and how it can be used well and deployed ethically,” Waycott tells Australian Ageing Agenda.

To help fill this gap in evidence Waycott has recently begun a four-year Australian Research Council funded project investigating technology beneficial for older people and how it can be used well and deployed ethically.

The study is looking at emerging technologies designed to enrich the lives of older people, such as virtual reality and social robots and other technology-based activities providing enjoyment and companionship, says Waycott.

“I want to learn from current practice and then do an in-depth analysis of particular examples before moving on to a design and deployment stage at the end of the project,” Waycott says.

She is also aiming to learn about and advance different activities supported by technology and provide guidelines to the aged care sector about how they can best use these technologies.

“I want to find out how we make sure that the technology is deployed in such a way that the benefits are realised and it is not experienced as a burden,” says Waycott.

That burden can be related to having to learn something new, says Waycott, who came across this outcome in previous research she conducted with Victorian not-for-profit aged care provider Benetas.

That study developed and trialled a photo sharing application for use among small groups of older people living independently at home and at risk of social isolation.

“They used the application to share photos with each other and we found this was a valuable way of building new social connections. They were building new friendships but there were also a number of challenges associated with using new technology in this space,” Waycott says.

Some participants chose to withdraw because they found it difficult to learn how to communicate in this way and that difficulty created a sense of failure, she says.

Participants sought

The first stage of the project, which is now underway, includes developers involved in designing various technologies used for social or emotional enrichment to improve the lives of older adults as well as aged care professionals using these kinds of technologies.

The scoping study includes a survey to find out how...
emerging technologies such as virtual reality and social robots are being used in the aged care sector. The survey also aims to discover what people working with these technologies in aged care find beneficial and challenging about them.

“I expect these will include a range of challenges not just relating to older people and their perception of using technology but also structural issues in aged care,” Waycott says.

“We are aware of the enormous pressure aged care staff are under at the moment. This is another way that technology can be experienced as a burden for the staff.”

Waycott is keen to hear from activities coordinators, diversional therapists, people responsible for implementing social programs and management in residential, home and day aged care services.

The survey has been sent to aged care providers nationally. Individuals interested in sharing their experiences and facilities open to running a technology trial later in the project are encouraged to also contact Waycott directly.

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