

Technology Solutions for the Elderly During Covid-19

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A few days ago, MaryLou Harrigan introduced us to our guest speakers virtually in lieu of the in-person Geriatric Services Conference, *Creating Synergy. Inspiring Change*. Today, Dr. Lillian Hung from the UBC Department of Nursing provides us with two articles, *Harnessing Technology to Help Older Adults Cope with Physical Distancing* and *Using Touchscreen Tablets in Care Settings to Support Social Connections and Reduce Responsive Behaviours among People with Dementia in Care Settings*.

In the care home where I work in South Surrey, we have made radical changes to the way we work since the Covid-19 outbreak was declared. This has included severely restricting visitors and moving the physicians to virtual visits and care conferences. This has led to a disconnect between residents and their families. That loss can lead to increased anxiety and agitation, so much so that one of our family members took a distressed resident home early on in the outbreak, only to bring her back a few days later when he quickly realized he could not meet her care needs.

These are some of the most vulnerable members of our society, and may be our parents, uncles, aunts, or neighbours, worthy of our compassionate care and protection in their twilight years.

Our care home has residents with a range of cognitive and physical abilities. One of our residents has her own iPad which she uses daily to contact both her daughters in Alberta and other family members in Vancouver. She had to overcome technical issues like charging the tablet and ensuring connection to the WiFi. Fortunately, she had the assistance of our Recreation Staff who were already using an iPad to connect to distant family members. The value of this technology abruptly soared when the home was effectively locked down. Another iPad was purchased by the home and the physicians started making their regular visits virtually. Sometimes a phone call would suffice, but often the visual added an important dimension to the care including examining a wound or calming someone's agitation.

With Care Conferences, we moved to *Zoom televideoconferences* where family and team members can have meaningful discussions about care priorities, particularly relevant in the time of Covid-19. Residents participate when they are able. Fortunately, our regulatory College has wisely prioritized the provision of care and permitted using these newer technologies, provided reasonable steps have been taken to protect privacy.

How about community-dwelling frail and pre-frail seniors? How can we prevent a precipitous decline in their functional capacity during the Covid-19 crisis? Dr Hung suggests *video chat, virtual cycling, on-line games, meditation* and other options. We know that physical exercise, mental stimulation, and social connections can improve quality of life and mitigate the onset of frailty.^{1 2} Technology can facilitate doing it safely. My own elderly parents enjoy video chats from their kids and grandkids and receive regular email reminders from the *NIH Go4Life* website encouraging a variety of safe exercises.³

Our Medical Health Officers suggest that physical distancing will be required for many months to come. Physical distancing during Covid-19, or any future outbreak, does not have to mean social distancing.

Technology is an important tool to help ensure we don't compromise the physical and mental wellbeing of our most vulnerable seniors.

¹ Rockwood, K., Song, X., MacKnight, C., et al. (2005). A global clinical measure of fitness and frailty in elderly people. *CMAJ*, 173: 489-495.

² Garm, A., Park, G.H., Song, X. (2017). Using an electronic comprehensive geriatric assessment and health coaching to prevent frailty in primary care: The CARES model. *Med Clin Rev*, 3:9. doi: 10.21767/2471-299X.1000051.

³ Larigakis, S. (2019). Can frailty be prevented? Or is it the inevitable decline in function that accompanies aging? *BCMJ*, 61(2): 85-86. Retrieved April 28, 2020 from <https://www.bcmj.org/cohp/can-frailty-be-prevented-or-it-inevitable-decline-function-accompanies-aging>.