

Aging with Independence and Dignity: Is Technology the Answer?

I recently attended a demonstration of an impressive array of high-tech features to support “aging in place” for seniors and persons living with disabilities. All of the devices and services employed a Wi Fi hub in the home provided by a cable television company. The display covered a wide range: remote monitoring of the person and home functions; home security and personal safety; voice-activated controls for phones, appliances, thermostats and other devices for persons with impaired vision; and programmable sensors to monitor heat, lights, smoke, carbon monoxide, stoves and more.

I was very impressed by a suite of smart home health devices including automatic fall detection, remote monitoring of blood pressure, blood oxygenation and respiration, a pillbox that tracked whether a patient has removed their pill, and a boot-like device measuring walking gait to determine risk of falling. Connected to and monitored by a primary care provider’s office, these devices could reduce the need for an in-person office visit while providing alerts about changes in the patient’s condition.

I had my first encounter with a virtual reality device. It allowed me to experience standing on a dock on Italy’s Amalfi coast and looking all around me at the beautiful scenery. This would be a wonderful option for bed-bound persons.

I had some questions. What about cost? A TV reporter calculated that using all of these devices (an unlikely scenario) would cost many thousands of dollars. But if they became widely-used, these technologies could become more affordable. Whether our adult children or caregivers live nearby or far away, connecting us to them by remote monitoring makes sense if used with good judgment. Perhaps a bit over the top, there was a “smart fork” that reported whether a person had eaten their meal. Does my son in Dallas need to know whether I ate dinner last night? Am I living independently if everyone is watching?

There is a bigger question---is a strategy of aging in place based heavily on what occurs inside one’s home the best way to go? We know that the biggest single factor endangering seniors’ health and longevity is social isolation. We believe that an “aging in community” approach is better and less expensive. It requires developing social capital-- at least one close friend with whom we can discuss our health and other personal matters; connection with other people on a regular basis through a social organization, church, village without walls, or a residence where neighbors look out for each other. Remote monitoring can’t measure our social capital. These kinds of connections are not for sale but their value is enormous.

We all want to age in a house or apartment that's safe, and I think many of us would welcome affordable technology to assist us with activities of daily living and communication with our children and friends. But I think that's not enough. We need maximum independence and connections to other people. No remote sensor can measure those qualities in our lives.