Modernising social alarms and telecare

The UK and Australia need to make sure that initiatives are in place to promote cyber awareness among service and technology providers, writes Dr Malcolm Fisk.

As we gather, store and share information in the course of our work and are increasingly reliant on those systems, we neglect the issue of cybersecurity at our peril.

My perspective is a little different from that of the clinicians. I come from a housing and social care background but have always had an interest in technologies, such as social alarms, telecare and increasingly telehealth, which can help people to remain independent. Not just at home, but also engaged in the economic and social lives of their communities.

My various roles and involvements mean that I continually challenge top-down ‘we know what’s best for you’ approaches to service delivery that can sometimes work against that engagement. But I champion different forms of service provision that facilitate greater engagement, involvement and choice for service users.

Therefore, as we harness the opportunities around digital communications and come to grip with our smart phones and interactive television, it becomes clear that those simple old social alarm and telecare systems are out of date.

We must recognise therefore that in a world where more people of all ages have ready and speedy internet access, the potential for those who are older to be empowered in new ways increases.

We have the opportunity, and responsibility, to develop new service models that re-enforce the potential.

In the new service models using the technologies we can change the way we work with service users and carers as we tackle together some of the rigours of ageing through:
- helping service users accept new services;
- promoting health literacy and building confidence; and
- facilitating engagement with education and work, social networks and entertainment.

But alas, service providers in the UK are only looking within their operations to find out-of-date or out-offashion technologies. Needless to say, with cybersecurity safeguards in place.

But both for the UK and Australia there is a conspiracy of whispers about this for fear of upsetting existing service providers as well as some of the technology suppliers, which in some cases may not be adequately prepared for the changes ahead.

Other services, which is currently the case in the UK, may be simply unviable at the current scale of their operations.

But just think what those new telehealth services would be able to do with the best of social alarms and telecare being integrated with new services that help people self-manage conditions from epilepsy to eczema. They could sit alongside primary healthcare and work together in a way that is not possible today.

So what are our key messages for health and social care in Australia? Up front must be the need to get moving on the roll out of your National Broadband Network. We must work harder on this in the UK too and in both our countries we must be sure that parallel initiatives are in place to promote cyber awareness among service and technology providers, and the public at large. With these, other things will follow.

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