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.

Hotfoot from the UK Health Show in London, I have been reflecting on the growing importance of cybersecurity within services for older people. The show gave prominence to the issue in the wake of cyber attacks, such as WannaCry, which sent shockwaves through UK health services.

But the broader message about cybersecurity is a strong one for both health and social care as we become more dependent on networks and information systems.

The contents of those networks and information systems now include vast and complex arrays of data for people who may be especially vulnerable. Decisions made on the basis of information held or the associated systems for monitoring their wellbeing are, and will be, increasingly made through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) that depends on the accuracy of that information.

The last thing we would want, therefore, is for this to be accessed, corrupted, altered or stolen by criminals – especially when so much of it comprises personal data about our service users and their carers. 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.

Dr Malcolm Fisk

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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smart phones and interactive television, it becomes clear that those simple old social alarm and telecare systems are out-of-date.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 this 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 access in new ways;
- 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 just beginning to wake up to the tremendous opportunity that the new networks offer.

It is in fact Scotland that leads the way in attempting to integrate health and social care and in calling for the more imaginative use of technologies to facilitate the development of new service models.

The other three UK nations will perhaps come to regret their missed opportunity, at least until a critical mass of service users cries out for some radically new service offerings.

But when it comes to cybersecurity, even Scotland is yet to put down a strong marker on the issue.

What of Australia? The same seems true about insufficient attention being given to cybersecurity. It hardly featured in my recent visit, courtesy of Community Resourcing Worldwide.

Though when thinking more widely and having been involved in different events during my visit, I admit that Australia appears to be ahead of the game with regard to innovative care approaches – notably with regard to the care and support of the frailest.

But where we both need a deep rethink is around the way we help those old social alarm and telecare services to evolve.

At the Telehealth Quality Group, we collaborate internationally and are building a partnership with Community Resourcing so we can share knowledge and together promote the use of smart and assistive technologies, including those around social alarms, telecare and telehealth.

We count ourselves as within that group of strategists and policymakers who see social alarms and telecare as increasingly needing to be absorbed within broader telehealth services that truly can harness the potential of new 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 the more widespread use of apps that are increasingly helping with medication prompts, activity or fitness monitoring and much more.

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.
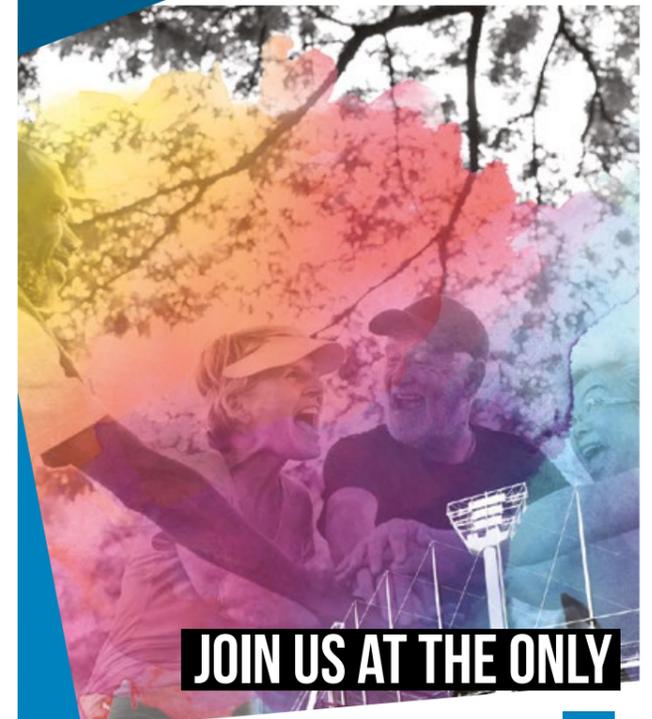
We must work harder on this in the UK too and in both our countries we must be sure that parallel initiatives are in place to promote cyber awareness among service and technology providers, and the public at large. With these, other things will follow.

If you want a taster of UK fare, the best starting point undoubtedly is the Scottish Centre for Telehealth and Telecare whose work links with multiple initiatives from which we all should learn the lessons (see sctt.org.uk).

Finally, for the emergent telehealth agenda then you should look at the Telehealth Quality Group and the International Code of Practice for Telehealth Services (see telehealth.global).

In the code you can note that, in addition to clear direction that will help shape new service models that encourage engagement, involvement and choice for service users, a strong emphasis on cybersecurity is included. ■

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