The facts on assistive technology

In the future, people will expect to access cost effective broadband services nationwide as well as have access to telehealth and other technologies that promote independence, quality of life and wellbeing.¹

National Seniors Australia calls for a national approach to the research, design and innovation of assistive technologies which focuses on responding to both current and future needs of Australia’s population.

It is crucial that such an approach takes into consideration the suitability and affordability of assistive technologies to increase uptake, allowing people to remain productive and live independently later in life.

We believe that such an approach would harmonise the aims and objectives of the National Strategy for an Ageing Australia and the National Enabling Technologies Strategy.

The World Health Organisation defines assistive technology as ‘an umbrella term for any device or system that allows individuals to perform tasks they would otherwise be unable to do, or increases the ease and safety with which tasks can be performed’.² They include:

- Communication and vision: screen readers, voice recognition, talking timers, eye control systems, speech generating devices
- Hearing: personal sound amplifiers, video door phone, strobe light smoke alarms
- Safety and Security: water overflow detectors, water temperature controls
- Health: medi cap removers, Medilink/LifeLink 24 hour monitoring support services.

There are now over 25,000 assistive technology devices currently available in the global market place.³

Benefits and types of assistive technology

Assistive technology has the potential to empower users to maintain control over their lives. Such advances in technology enable older Australians to continue living within their own homes for longer and thus remain connected to their community which is vital for wellbeing and identity. Assistive technologies are highly valued by those who live with low vision, chronic health conditions and neurological diseases, such as dementia. Their use can reassure relatives, friends and carers that a person remains safe within their own home and that responses to emergencies will be timely. They also provide relief to those who take on the often physically and emotionally demanding caring roles.⁴

- Telecare: community alarms, sensors and movement detectors, and the use of video conferencing to allow visual and auditory communication with carers (e.g LifeLink in Australia).
- Telehealth: aim to help people manage their long-term conditions in their own home and can be very useful for rural communities or to gain specialist medical opinion.
- Videos, Games, Smart Technology: interactive rehabilitation program for people who have had a stroke and touch-screen monitors for people with dementia to access reminiscence materials or entertainment features.
- Environmental and Person Centred Design: a focus on the whole environment is considered as a way of helping the older person to live independently or to reduce the burden of care on their family, or others who provide support (e.g universal design).

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According to Alzheimer’s Australia, by the year 2060 spending on dementia will outstrip that of any other health condition. Spending on this disease is “projected to be $83 billion and will represent around 11 per cent of health and residential aged care sector spending”. With this in mind, it is timely that a national framework for the development, accessibility and affordability of assistive technologies be considered as a policy priority.

Assistive technology: the Australian context

Currently, Australia does not have a specific national program for assistive technologies that focuses on the growing and ageing population. In 2012, the Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education ran a series of forums with stakeholders resulting in the development of the National Enabling Technologies Strategy. The final report recommended that Australia needs to:

- Maximise the benefits of assistive technologies through forming and implementing a coordinated approach and vision to better prepare for future population growth
- Locate niches for assistive technologies that are appropriate to Australia’s comparative advantages allowing Australia to become a globally recognised specialist
- Support industries in a global setting that produce assistive technologies by fostering an appropriate environment where enabling technology companies can flourish and attract international companies to Australia
- Develop and fund research for enhanced knowledge and innovation.

Utilising assistive technologies within Australia depends upon the accessibility of high quality and affordable internet services, public education of the benefits and availability of such technologies within the home and community, consistent policies for subsidised devices across all tiers of government, overcoming the current low acceptance of technologies and accommodating varying user capacities and abilities.

1 National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre (NSPAC) & Haukka, S. 2011. Older Australians and the Internet: Bridging the Digital Divide. Brisbane