Social Care and Life Quality of Frail or Dependent Elderly: The Contribution of Technologies

Cristina Albuquerque, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

ABSTRACT
In this article the author underlines the potentialities of technological achievements and ICT applications in social and health care systems to best accomplish the goals of autonomy, social participation and quality of life of frail or dependent elderly. Additionally some critical questions concerning the use of technological devises to promote alternative responses to dependency and isolation of elderly are also discussed, namely associated with inequalities in the access and use of technology and with ethical questions of privacy and confidentiality.

KEYWORDS
Dependency, Elderly, ICT, Integration, Life Quality, Privacy, Social Care

1. INTRODUCTION
The aging of population is actually a worldwide reality that mobilizes social researchers and health professionals and the most diverse social and political areas. In fact, one of the most relevant concerns on the twentieth first century, especially in developed Western societies, is to protect and to care adequately of the elderly. Elderly people will be in fact one of the most substantial segments of near future societies, playing an important role in economic, cultural and social dimensions. For this, it is imperative to find processes to support their active, healthy and continued social and economic participation for as long as possible (Iyer & Eastman, 2006). Nevertheless, dependency is becoming a new social risk that needs innovative answers anchored in a most integrated and complex comprehension of elderly life and expectations.

The increasing percentage of elderly in the global population is related not only with the low fertility rates, but also with the extended life expectancy produced and consolidated by improvements in health care systems and science/technology developments. According to European data projections, by 2050 almost 140 million people will be older than 65 in Europe. In the same way the number of...
people aged 80 years old, and above, is projected to increase enormously in Europe, from 22 million in 2008 to 61 million in 2060 (European Economy 2, 2009), growing also, consequently, the probability of dependency or disability.

Effectively, data reveal that the increase in the average length of life produces a higher incidence of disability and chronic illness, with consequences to health and social care systems. The multi-morbid disease patterns affecting actually older people are well known, as well as the impacts of it. Healthcare systems and social care organizations have to manage increasing expenses with services adaptation, new devices and pharmaceuticals. The actual costs of the health care systems will be impossible to uphold in the next decades, considering namely the ratio between elderly and working population (one to one by 2050).

The families are also confronted with new exigencies that they don’t know how to manage effectively and how to conciliate practices and expectations, associated either with family care duties, or with nowadays life-style and pressures.

The concern with the situations of elderly dependency has shown in fact the growing need for long-term care provided by the family networks and community supports, forcing also a restructuring of the social, political and economic responses to the problem in order to assure quality of life and social inclusion for older people (Mollenkopf and Walker, 2007; Noll, 2007). For instance the return home of the elderly patient after hospitalization is, at this point, particularly important.

The main concern nowadays is thus related with how to protect and monitor dependent individuals and to support family members and caregivers involved, minimizing the negative impacts of a situation of dependency (Brito, 2002), and assuring comprehensive ways to guarantee healthy and meaningful ageing, to increase social participation and to prepare a better adaptation to retirement.

For this purpose integrated measures (social, economic, technological) are essential. They must be directed, not only to the elderly needs, but also to the caregivers expectations and problems, namely associated with exhaustion and conciliation between care and work.

So, new answers and innovative processes must be conceived in which support technology and ICT can play an important role. This is recognized by the European Union at least since the Riga Declaration which was adopted in June 2006. The main Riga goals are the improvement of the quality of life of citizens, by assuring opportunities for increased participation and the access to information, eliminating obstacles and discrimination processes, especially for people with special needs and the elderly. In this context, it was created the “i2010” as a European answer to improve elderly quality of life in the dimensions of care health and social care, as well as to promote conditions for the development of ICT specialized in responding to the problems of aging in Europe. Like this, the “i2010” action plan intended to achieve three different axes: a) ageing well at work, by promoting innovative practices supported by ICT and more flexible working; b) ageing well in community, by the use of social networks, reducing social isolation, especially in territories of low population density and rural regions; c) ageing well at home, enabling, by the use of ICT, elderly people to appreciate a better quality of life, associated with a major level of health, autonomy, liberty, memory and dignity (EC, Information Society and Media, 2010).

In fact, in what concerns the personal, social and economic challenges produced by demographic evolution in Europe, ICT and health technology developments can make important contributions, not only to assure independent and participant living for elderly, but also, to assure gains in some aspects such as: reducing expenses of health and care systems; providing individual solutions to dependency problems; improving life standards; liberation of families; wider participation of elderly and management of their home conditions (McLean, 2011).

In this article we intend to present a reflection about the importance and potentialities of the technology achievements and ICT applications to best accomplish the goals of autonomy, social
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