

Lifestyle

Contemporary connectivity

In the 21st century, keeping in touch is increasingly dependent on being connected to the information superhighway. **Tim Dixon** looks at some innovative ways in which governments, providers and technology companies are working together to help older people stay 'in the loop'.

On her 94th birthday, Sylvia Simons received a 'virtual visit' from her granddaughter, Kylie, and three of her great grandchildren. Using just a laptop, a wireless internet connection, a webcam and free Skype software, the resident of Kolor Lodge in the small Victorian town of Peshurst was able to hold a 'face-to-face' conversation with her relatives, three hours drive away in Melbourne. They 'shared' a cake, sang Happy Birthday and enjoyed each other's smiles.

The simple exchange made a strong impression on the Ambassador for Ageing, Noeline Brown, who was paying an 'actual' visit to Kolor Lodge that day.

"It was absolutely sensational to see a very frail elderly woman being assisted by volunteers to use this technology," she recalls. "It was just wonderful to see her face light up when she saw the faces of her great grandchildren on the screen."

"In that family, there are three children under the age of five and getting them strapped into the car to drive three hours there and three hours back, is a huge thing to do on a regular basis. So it is great for her to be able to use this technology to keep in touch without the hassle."

This type of experience is now commonplace at Kolor Lodge, thanks to the 'Virtual Visiting' program begun by the Western District Health Service (WDHS) in 2007. Every fortnight Ms Simons catches up with her young relatives to swap stories and carry out important tasks, such as critiquing their latest works of art. Other residents

have similar arrangements with relatives who live out of town, interstate and even overseas. Program Manager, Sue Rondeau says the project has enabled residents to re-connect with distant friends and family.

"They love being able to see their families and friends," she says. "Many of them found talking on the telephone difficult, but once a visual link was made, it really created a change in the dynamics of the conversation. Now they talk for up to an hour at a time."

At first the program was trialled in two facilities under the supervision of specially trained volunteers. After a few months it became obvious that the virtual visits were



A Kolor Lodge staff member assisting a resident with a virtual visit.

"The printed photo and the hard-copy letter are not used very much any more as a means of communication."

David Cooke

proving a hit with residents and families, so WDHS made a commitment to roll out the program in all seven of its aged care facilities.

This goal was achieved in June last year and around the same time, the Commonwealth Government provided the organisation with a \$120,000 grant to develop a set of policy guidelines and procedures to help other homes set up Virtual Visiting projects. The organisation is now inviting 19 facilities in Victoria's southwest to share in the program and eventually, it hopes to see it rolled out across Australia.

"The technology has now got to a point where it is actually useable and reliable, even in many rural areas," says Rondeau. "So I really think we should take advantage of that and use it as much as we can."

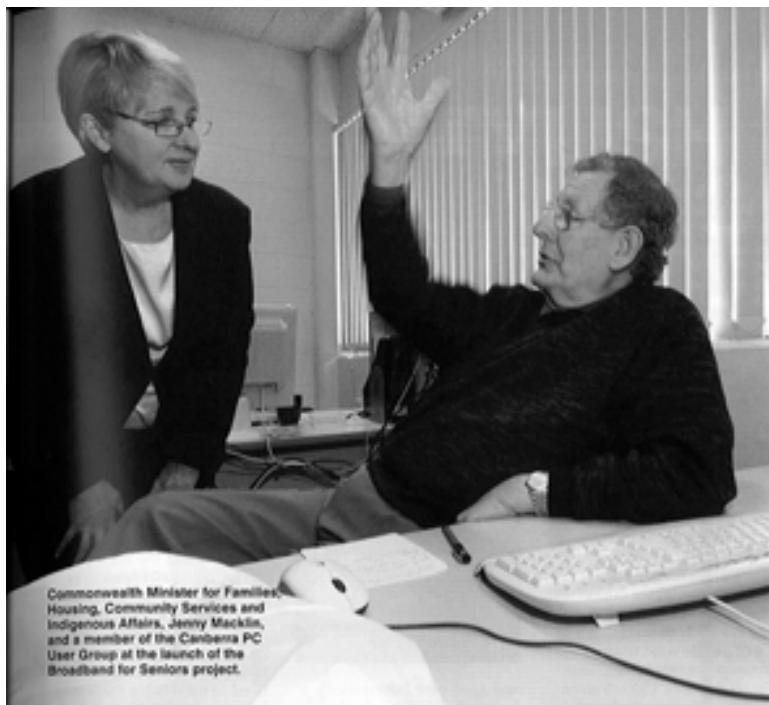
LOOKING OUTWARDS

In fact, the Virtual Visiting program in Victoria is just one of many pilot programs and projects currently underway, which are using internet-based technology to help older Australians to stay in touch with friends, family and the broader community. As well as targeting aged care residents, a number of these trials are

looking to reach older people still living in the community.

Just last year, the Commonwealth Government launched a \$15 million initiative to establish 2,000 free internet kiosks in community centres and clubs that are popular among older people. The Broadband for Seniors program, which is being operated by NEC Australia in partnership with the Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association and the University of the Third Age, will provide training to pensioners and self-funded retirees.

According to the Group Manager of NEC's Broadcast and Media division, David Cooke, the project has an important social inclusion agenda. He says the current generation of older people – commonly referred to as the 'builders' – is in a unique position. Although they live in the age of the internet, many of them have never acquired the skills and experiences required to be fully-fledged



Commonwealth Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, and a member of the Canberra PC User Group at the launch of the Broadband for Seniors project.

kind of thing will be naturally occurring more and more. Ultimately everyone will be internet-connected but at the moment there is a gap. With this project, the government is kick-starting the process for those who don't have a background in this space."

"The printed photo and the hard-copy letter are not used very much as a means of communication any more. So we are trying to introduce these series to contemporary forms of communication to ensure they don't get left behind."

A HOMELY TOUCH

Other projects are working on the premise that the builders are ready for internet technology closer to home, or rather, in their own homes. And to achieve that goal, it is necessary to make the technology as simple and accessible as possible.

Software company, Acryn has adapted its customer management product for businesses and coupled it with touchscreen monitors to make an intuitive, easy-to-use solution. Aimed at

'netizens'. Because web-based communication and information-sharing is an integral part of daily life today, a significant proportion

of builders are in danger of missing out.

"This is a sector of the community that is generally under-served when you are

talking about access to online services," says Cooke. "As the population ages over time, there will be more and more IT-literate seniors and this

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"Mum in Moonee Ponds", the Knowledge Community system allows users to log on and share emails, photos and videos with their friends and family, using a simple menu interface. It also has the ability to give reminders, like medication alerts, and to record when older clients respond to them.

While the system is primarily focused on promoting wellness and social connectedness for older people living alone, Acryn's CEO Cameron Clark says it also provides family members and professional carers with peace of mind. They too can log on to certain, unrestricted areas of their relative or client's account, to check that everything is okay.

"It shows that they are alive and up and active when they turn it on in the morning," he says.

The group is gearing up for a pilot trial of the system in a Melbourne retirement village and even at this early stage, Clark says he has been surprised by the high level of interest from seniors living providers and older Australians alike.

we talk to are telling us, 'Yeah, that will work'."

With the help of a \$64,000 Commonwealth grant, the Smart Services Collaborative Research Centre is currently trialling a similar, touchscreen system in a Sydney retirement village. Right from the start, the project's aim has been to foster the "social contact element". And to overcome apprehensions about modern technology, the Keep in Touch Australia system features a seniors-friendly interface that looks just like a photo frame. Users just have to touch the photo of a friend or relative to send them an audio message, along with a photo or video attachment.

"We haven't gone down the real-time image (video-conferencing) route because our research showed that a lot of people want to send messages at odd hours," says Smart Services' CEO, Warren Bradey. "We actually found that an 'asynchronous' system would be more likely to be used, particularly for relatives living overseas."

In the broader context, Bradey believes the project is part of a natural progression.

"What we are hearing and seeing is that the premise that the older generation is not 'wired' or 'connected' is simply not true." Cameron Clark

"What we are hearing and seeing is that the premise that the older generation is not 'wired' or 'connected' is simply not true," he says. "What is happening is that the grandkids are forcing their grandparents online to show them their photos from team sports and other activities. And the grandparents want to be there; they want to see that and they are getting involved."

"There seems to be a bit of momentum in this area and that surprised us a little. At the beginning of 2008 I wouldn't have said that there was a market for this type of product but people are starting to respond to the idea - and almost all the providers

"We certainly see this as an important bridging mechanism for the lifestyle we have adopted and developed in western society today. People tend to have less and less contact with their aged parents but this is a new way to let them keep in contact in a manner that works for everybody."

SELLING THE CONCEPT

The next big challenge in this area is finding the best way to market and sell the types of products being used in these trials. Associate Professor Jeffrey Soar from the University of Southern Queensland's Collaboration for Ageing

FOLLOW UP

- For more information about the Virtual Visiting project, contact Sue Rondeau at Susan.rondeau@wchs.net
- Organisations that are interested in finding out more about participating in the Broadband for Seniors program can log on to www.neseniors.net.au
- To find out more about Acryn's Knowledge Community solution, contact Cameron Clark at cameron.clark@acryn.com
- To find out more about the Keep in Touch project, contact Warren Bradey at warren.bradey@smartservicescsc.com.au

and Aged-care Informatics Research, identifies funding and coordination as the main barriers to commercial implementation.

A successful example of a real-world project that Soar likes to give, is a large-scale solution initiated by the Montedomini Healthcare Center - a public agency which provides acute care, residential aged care, community care and rehabilitation services in Florence, Italy. When it wanted to introduce an electronic home care service, Montedomini went straight to the market with a tender process that was won by French telecommunications company, Alcatel. The resulting project now connects over 2,000 older people in the Florentine region via webcams, set-top boxes and their television.

"Older people watch a lot of television so it is a good tool for them. It is very easy for them to pick up," says Associate Professor Soar.

The project, which is administered by a central call centre staffed by 20 people, also sends alerts and monitors participant safety with in-home sensors. While the sophisticated government-funded system is not cheap, it is evaluated from a whole-of-health perspective. Montedomini describes the program as a

cost-effective service because it has dramatically reduced the number of outpatient visits within the region. A similar project in West Lothian, Scotland, now has 5,000 older households connected. Soar says a recent project review indicated that it too produced significant system savings through reduced nursing home stays and hospital visits.

Back here in Australia, cost is of course a key concern for people like Clark and Bradey. Each of the eight-inch touchscreens used in the Keep in Touch systems sells for about \$1,000. To make the project more attractive to a broad range of users, Bradey estimates that the price of a whole unit would need to be closer to \$500. But he remains optimistic because prices are already starting to fall.

Perhaps more important than raw costs though, is the need to establish a successful business model. Clark hopes his solution will eventually be subsidised so that it can be offered as a free or low-cost service to consumers, although he concedes that he is nervous about asking older pensioners to pay up. Governments would be an obvious source of subsidies but Clark would prefer a model based around targeted advertising, similar to the popular social networking site, Facebook.

Coming at the problem from a different angle, Bradey is considering whether the Keep in Touch system should be packaged and marketed as a consumer product by telecommunications companies, or delivered as a services option by retirement villages seeking a point of differentiation.

Although there are many options, one clear objective remains: to take these systems to the Mums in Moonee Ponds, Manurah and Moree. And that is why the current crop of projects is so important.

"We want to find out what works and what doesn't," says Clark. "That's already starting to happen and that's where we need to be. We need to monitor the outputs and gather the feedback and then, in a year's time, hopefully we will have gone through some of those issues and we will be getting ready for deployment." ■