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The Future of Australian Aged Care: Embracing Innovation and Person-Centred Approaches

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Introduction

The field of aged care has undergone significant transformation around the world over the past decades, evolving in response to changing demographics, societal attitudes, and advancements in technology [1-5]. As the global population continues to age, it becomes imperative to envision and prepare for the future of aged care beyond institutional minimum standard systems such as those currently operational in Australia. This paper explores the potential directions and innovations that will shape the future of aged care, focusing on person-centred approaches, technological advancements, and the integration of interdisciplinary care models.

Demographic Shifts and Societal Changes

One of the key driving forces behind the evolution of aged care is the global demographic shift towards an older population. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the global population aged over 60 is expected to double by 2050, reaching two million people and countries around the world are grappling with this shift in population. This demographic change presents both challenges and opportunities for the aged care sector but underscores the need for a more comprehensive and responsive approach to cater to the diverse needs of older adults.

Societal attitudes toward ageing in Australia are also changing, albeit at a glacial pace. This may be a direct consequence of the broader changing cultural demographics away from Anglo-Saxon origins towards communities from the Middle East, Asia and Sub-Continent, where elders are revered and respected [6,7]. The future of aged care must align with these changing attitudes, promoting a culture that respects and supports the autonomy and dignity of older adults as a fundamental principle.

Person-Centred Care: Shifting the Paradigm

Despite being developed by social psychologist Tom Kitwood decades ago, Person Centred Care (PCC) is experiencing a renaissance of popularity and is a founding principle of many progressive dementia care models around the world [1-5]. Sadly, while PCC is often espoused in Australian aged care facilities, in reality, it is rarely practiced and is overwhelmed with the limitations imposed by institutional Australian aged care.

Kitwood's person-centred care involves building positive and enriching relationships to improve wellbeing and enabling the person living with dementia to communicate their wants, needs and desires and retain a sense of identity. Meeting a person's needs for love, attachment, comfort, occupation and inclusion will give them a sense of self-worth and can reduce agitated and/or apathetic behaviour. This approach acknowledges that each older adult has unique preferences, needs, and life experiences that should guide their care. It involves actively involving older adults in decision-making, tailoring services to their preferences, and fostering a sense of control over their lives [8,9].

Person Centred Care requires resources, including staff, and a flexible and responsive organisational culture to succeed. Trying to deliver PCC within the bounds of an institutional organisation will never work, no matter the dedication of individual team members. Research indicates that person-centred care leads to improved health outcomes and greater satisfaction among older adults. A study by Edvardsson et al. found that older adults receiving person-centred care experienced better quality of life and increased engagement in daily activities [10].

Implementing person-centred care requires a re-evaluation of healthcare professionals' training, communication skills, empathy, and understanding the psychosocial needs of older adults are critical components of this approach. Training programs should focus on equipping caregivers with the skills needed to engage with older adults in a meaningful and person-centred way [11]. It requires more than new building design and encompasses changes in attitude, governance, policy, procedure and resource allocation.

Technology as an Enabler

Technological advancements are poised to revolutionize aged care by enhancing the quality of care, enabling remote monitoring, and promoting social engagement. Assistive technologies, such as smart home devices and wearable health trackers can help older adults maintain their independence while optimising their safety. Falls prevention and monitoring technologies such as the Livius system enable monitoring without intrusion or invasion of privacy [12]. These devices

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can provide real-time data to caregivers and healthcare professionals, enabling timely interventions and reducing hospitalisations.

Telehealth and virtual care platforms are becoming more accessible, allowing older adults to access medical consultations, counselling, and social interactions from the comfort of their homes. This trend not only addresses barriers to healthcare access but also minimizes the sense of isolation that many older adults experience. The use of cloud connected clinical instruments such as those developed by Rossmax allow for the automatic recording of resident clinical data and simultaneously improving accessibility by clinical managers and external health providers [13].

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning have the potential to predict health risks and deterioration, enabling proactive interventions although due to the enormous value of interpersonal relationship and human connection, such advances need to be carefully considered. Predictive analytics can help healthcare providers identify patterns in older adults' health data and develop personalized care plans that target specific needs.

Interdisciplinary Care Models

The future of aged care also needs to involve a shift from traditional, siloed healthcare models to interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches. Older adults often have complex medical and psychosocial needs that require expertise from multiple disciplines, including medicine, nursing, psychology, social work, physiotherapy, exercise physiology, dietetics, speech pathology, recreational therapy and occupational therapy.

Collaborative care models, such as the Community Home Model, bring together professionals from different fields to develop holistic support plans that not only consider medical needs but also factors like mental health, social support, and functional abilities. Interdisciplinary care teams can provide more comprehensive assessments, reduce fragmented care, and enhance the overall well-being of older adults [14,15]. Equally important is the inclusion of education and research programs through partnerships between providers and universities. Community Home Australia and the University of Canberra participate in ongoing collaboration across multiple clinical disciplines providing student clinical placements, research opportunities and cross employment opportunities. Such partnerships provide professional development opportunities as well as exposing future generations of health professionals to innovative care models.

Age-Friendly Environments

Creating age-friendly physical environments is another critical aspect of the future of aged care. The movement away from institutional environmental models to small scale, household models is already well established overseas but has been poorly embraced in Australia. Many existing household or cottage models that have been established by aged care providers are hampered by the institutional thinking of the organisation and as a result, fail to harness the potential these models could deliver.

Effective household models include an integration into the community that is almost universally absent from Australian

aged care. It is widely acknowledged that 40% of residential aged care residents receive no visitors [16] and anecdotally, a greater number never leave the confines of their facility on a regular basis with many never leaving at all. This level of community disconnection is catastrophic to wellbeing.

In contrast, age-friendly communities foster social inclusion and engagement. Community centres, recreational activities, and volunteer opportunities promote interaction between generations and combat social isolation. In the future, urban planning and architecture will need to increasingly focus on creating environments that support ageing in place and enable our Elders to continue participating in the world around them.

Community Home Australia's Club Kalina day program delivers intergenerational programs, pet therapy, social outings and a wide range of person centric activity all embedded in the local community [17].

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

While the future of aged care holds great promise, it also presents challenges including how we are going to pay for the highest quality care in a society that undervalues the ageing population and has an almost pathological obsession with minimising income tax, which is the key funder of aged care programs. An imperative for the Australian government is to accurately identify what best practice aged care looks like, what older Australians want, what that costs to deliver and how we are going to pay for it. Until each of these factors are critically examined and analysed, aged care will never improve beyond institutionalisation.

Workforce issues remain front and centre and require a transformational intervention to correct the glaring obstacles to making aged care an attractive employment proposition. Better pay, better training, greater support, respect and resources all need urgent attention if the enduring workforce crisis is to be resolved. We cannot expect leaping improvements in care quality if the workforce continues to be constrained by societal ageism.

Privacy and data security are also vitally important when developing technology-enabled care solutions and balancing the benefits of remote monitoring and data collection with older adults' autonomy and consent is crucial. While technological advances are vital, systems must be user friendly, integrated and present demonstrable benefits to those receiving care, providers and the regulators.

Conclusion

The future of aged care is a dynamic landscape that will be shaped by changing demographics, evolving societal attitudes, technological innovation, and a commitment to person-centred approaches. As the global population continues to age, it is imperative to embrace innovations that enhance the quality of care, promote independence, and foster social engagement. By prioritizing person-centred care, harnessing the power of technology, embracing interdisciplinary collaboration, and creating age-friendly environments, society can pave the way for a future where older Australians thrive and age with dignity.

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