

## **Living to a ripe old age with 'new technology'**

The cold weather we experienced around the Christmas and new year period will have been particularly difficult for the UK's growing elderly population, a group that is particularly vulnerable when the temperature drops.

This is also a sector of the population that is continuing to grow as people live longer. In the next 20 years, while the UK population increases by eight per cent, the numbers of people aged 60 to 74 is expected to rise by 43 per cent, those aged 75 to 84 by 48 per cent and those aged 85 and over by a staggering 138 per cent (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys).

As more and more of us live longer, we can expect to face age-associated disease and disability as well as financial challenges and the difficulties of dealing with freezing conditions - and we can be sure that the NHS and other public services will struggle to cope.

As the last edition of *Kent Profile* highlighted, though, new technology is playing an increasingly broad and valuable part in helping elderly and vulnerable people remain living safely and independently in their own homes.

While children today take so much new technology for granted, it is still a novelty for many who will be reaching 'old age' in the next 20 years. Despite this, even talk of 'bluetooth' and 'WiFi' scares us less than the thought of tuning in the video machine did just a decade ago. We might worry that 'big brother' is watching us via the thousands of CCTV cameras all over the country, but we also hope that new technology can help us be, and feel, more secure.

What people are less aware of is how we could benefit from 'telecare' and other 'assistive technology' in our old age. These elements of new technology have been around for years and are quietly improving all the time. They are also changing the way vulnerable older (and younger) people live independently in their own homes.

If you ever need health or social care services to support your daily living, the chances are that you will be one of the 90 per cent of people who say they want to continue to live independently at home. The chances are also that you will in any event have little alternative, as places in residential or nursing homes will be at a premium.

What will help you stay secure while staying at home is technology that will remind you to take your medication, help you move about your home or alert a call centre in a crisis. Equally importantly, your family, friends and carers will be able to relax in the knowledge that when they can't keep an eye on you, the technology can. It can also include detectors or monitors that, when necessary, will alert a call centre staffed around the clock, 365 days a year.

When I worked in old people's homes 25 years ago, the most sophisticated equipment was the fire alarm system connected to the local fire station. Nowadays telecare systems can be programmed to monitor an individual's health or well-being and provide early warning of deterioration, prompting a response from family or professionals. Known as 'telehealth' this technology is designed to complement rather than replace health care.

As the world changes, keep an eye on the technological developments that will allow us to live more independently in our own homes in our old age - but remember that the gadgetry needs to be balanced with other forms of care and support unless we are happy to sacrifice personal control and independence to the technology and to 'big brother'.