Transatlantic Telehealth Research Network
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Social Isolation and Older People: New Issues for Long Term Care in the United Kingdom

Dr Malcolm J Fisk
De Montfort University, Leicester
malcolm.fisk@dmu.ac.uk
The UK Context

- Economic and social context more akin to US than EU in terms of extent of social inequalities
  - But very strong coverage for social welfare and healthcare provision
- Shared dilemmas and challenges relating to demographic change
  - But little radical thinking - about the need and potential for changes in service models ... in face of realities
    - (a) new technologies;
    - (b) rights, empowerment of older people;
    - (c) economic imperative that accompanies demographic change; and
    - (d) COVID-19
The UK Context

- Services for older people shaped in a different age
- post-war welfarism
- State intervention
- ... NHS for medical care
- ... municipal authorities for social care and housing
- Taking cues from charitable (philanthropic) bodies
- ... institutional solutions for the ‘deserving’
- ... parallel agendas for bureaucratic frameworks, professional bodies and ‘mindsets’ at all levels
Loneliness in the UK

- Loneliness ... recognised as an agenda for all ages but with particular facets that may apply especially to older people

- National Survey for Wales (2016-17): 10% of those aged 75+ were lonely (cf. 20% aged 16-24)
  - Wales survey (2003): 6% (aged 60+) ‘lonely all the time / daily’; 21% ‘sometimes’
- England - longitudinal study (2016/17): 24% (aged 50+) ‘often feel lonely’ ... a figure almost unchanged in 10 years
- Social isolation as a contributory factor
- What are our targets / research foci? ... multifaceted issues, much more than health!
Social Isolation

  - 13% of people ‘worried and disconnected’ (‘typically’ aged 70+; mostly retired)
  - 12% of people ‘struggling and alone’ linked especially with ‘poor health’, ‘low income’ and ‘financial insecurity’

- All sorts of factors ... impacting on loneliness
  - health [see below] and living alone (primary factors)
  - lifestyle choice, bereavement, divorce; family, friends
  - income, wealth and savings
  - motivation, confidence, habit, social norms

- housing - residential care, grouped (sheltered) housing, retirement community
  - community context - urban, rural
  - opportunity – digital literacy, access to activities, etc.

- Health ... depression; physical (cardio-vascular disease, low immune system, reduced mobility); sensory (cognition, hearing, sight, speech impairment)
Loneliness in the COVID-19 Context

- Renewed focus of the main charities
- ‘Campaign to End Loneliness’ (2011+) led by Independent Age
  - making loneliness a public priority
- Age Cymru calling for (Welsh) national campaign ... to raise awareness and encourage people to ‘make connections’
  - challenging cutbacks in local services (including transport) and facilities
- ... championing an Age-Friendly Wales
- Welsh Government 2020 (Feb) launched ‘Connected Communities Strategy for Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation’
Loneliness in COVID-19 Context

- Welsh Government (2020)
  ‘Connected Communities: Strategy for Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation’
  [links to (a) 2014 Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act
  (b) ‘Digital Inclusion and Health Programme’]
  … focus on ‘trigger points’
  - Concern or intent to / for
  … build psychological and emotional resilience
  - ensure support, leverage resources
  … improve ‘digital capabilities of citizens and health and social care staff’
  - people to be active participants in own health and well-being … including self-management

- Recognition of wider digital opportunities
Loneliness in the COVID-19 Context

- **UK Government guidelines** re. older people... over 70s (at greater risk) ‘should self-isolate as precautionary measure’... no direct contact with family and friends... notable impact on older people (and family carers) in care homes or receiving home care... restrictions now loosening (e.g. support ‘bubbles’ and travel permitted)
- **Welsh Government guidelines**... if at ‘high risk of severe illness’ due to COVID-19 are notified and must shield – but may ‘join’ with another household
- **All**: Distancing of 2m if not in same household

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*Diogelwch Covid-19 Covid-19 Safety*

**Cadwch 2 fetr ar wahân**
*Keep 2 metres apart*
Digital Thinking to Combat Loneliness and Social Isolation: Pre COVID-19

- Over decades: digital technology (essentially telehealth) was resisted, ignored, sidelined due to perceived ‘threat’ of reduced social contact
- Reality (long-standing): Aspects of telecare*, telehealth, telemedicine – have included tele- and video-contact (and consultations)
  - Reality: Ubiquity (and use) of mobile phones (apps), Skype and video-links
  - Reality (new): Voice-assistants (Alexa, Siri, etc.)
- Reality (slowly increasing): An appreciation of the empowerment potential of some technologies – subject to appropriate design and service configurations
  - All the above technologies increasingly in the hands of people of all ages
    - less stigma, increasingly adopted and, in any case, no longer able to be ignored by service providers
    - integral to our lives, they must work for ‘us’ ... each briefly explored
Digital Thinking to Combat Loneliness and Social Isolation: Post COVID-19

- Telehealth (at least in the form of tele- and video-consultations) becomes new norm
  ... crisis around services for patients generally
  ... issues for services to (older) people in care homes or receiving home care
  ... need for rules around treatment of people with (or suspected) COVID-19
  ... also other illnesses, etc.

- Specific issues (loneliness and social isolation) for older people quickly signalled - but is lack of clarity regarding impact or best service approaches
Digital Thinking to Combat Loneliness and Social Isolation: Post COVID-19

- **Tele-consultations** are, perhaps, not an issue (and now accepted tool of communication within services)
- But **video-consultations** only established in niches (tele-psychiatry; S&L therapy; radiography) ... though in use or trialled for other specialisms ... and now the new norm within GP and hospital outpatient services
- GPs went (<2 months) from ‘nil’ to >70% of patient consultations via tele- or video- ... has generally worked (after a call or two) with many people happy for this to be part of the ‘mix’
  - The decades long barriers crumbled •
Digital Thinking to Combat Loneliness and Social Isolation: Post COVID-19

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As succinctly put (for clinicians) by Prof Trish Greenhalgh

“clinicians didn’t have any particular reason to use telehealth and they thought it a bit weird ... to be consulting by telephone or video when you could just bring the patient in and look at them – as you were taught!”
Issues for the Technologies and Services

- **Telecare**
  
  ... rooted in social alarms (PRS) and ‘narrow’ telehealth perspective (vital-signs monitoring devices linked to home hubs)
  
  - Some services include a home responder (especially in urban areas) ...
    limited empowerment perspective?
  
  - Potential impact in COVID-19 context on loneliness or social isolation?

  ... link to extent of integration with other services

  - Example = Radius Connect 24 (Northern Ireland) service to 23,000 (mainly) older people

  ... via their COVID-19 Action Plan

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[Image: Telecare device with labels]
Issues for the Technologies and Services

- **Radius24** (telecare service but considerable use of vital-signs, falls and other devices)
- Reduced number + re-location of call handling work-stations; facilitation of home working
- Extra staff trained, laptops provided for e.g. outgoing morning calls (increased from 1300 to over 4,000) by 35 strong ‘call advisor team’
- Installations and maintenance calls done by courier, with telephone support
- Limited visits, ensuring adequate PPE
- Exploring potential for closer working with health boards

... and for video-consultations
Issues for the Technologies and Services

- **Mobile phones and Apps**
  - Huge advantage because of relevance and usefulness to people of all ages
    - portability, no stigma
    - and menus of apps (increasing numbers of which are NHS approved)
  - Issues for design
    - usability (e.g. for people with visual, dexterity, cognitive impairments)
  - Rapid adoption because
    - they are empowering
    - they are owned by the person (therefore clear choices can be exercised)
Issues for the Technologies and Services

- **Voice assistants**
  - Initial indications of acceptance... interesting, fun and empowering (depending on range of information, networks facilitated)
  - Experimental use to support older people by Australian Care organisation (Feros) ... with extraordinarily empowering ethos ... with ‘virtual’ office model ... and a foundation to tackle loneliness ... a virtual social centre ... practical support to use Skype, etc.
  - Their ethos is about ‘smashing stereotypes’ calling for older people to ‘grow bold with us’

Issues for the Technologies and Services

- The wider picture ... inspired by Feros; and also think about Call & Check (on the island of Jersey)
  - It’s all about breaking down old barriers
  - Call & Check - focused on role of postal workers
    - ... keeping eye (phone calls now instead of door-knocking)
    - ... commissioned for all prescription deliveries (25,000 so far), also COVID-19 swab collections
    - ... people have digital platform (and request ‘Living Packs’ in relation to varied needs)
  - Early indication of technology platform as very useful ... but also personal contact!
  - Further thought needed about future role of postal workers

www.callandcheck.com
Issues for the Technologies and Services

- **The wider picture** ... inspired by Feros; also think about Call & Check
- It’s about breaking down old barriers ... hugely important in COVID-19 context
  - Not just technologies ... but they are definitely part of the mix
  - Other technologies, too (see below)! ★
- Important not to distracted by ‘narrow’ technophilia ... that is top-down, overly commercially oriented, ageist or disempowering
Issues for the Technologies and Services

- The wider picture ... inspired by Feros; also think about Call & Check
- It’s about breaking down old barriers ... hugely important in COVID-19 context
- Not just technologies ... but they are definitely part of the mix
- Need to harness the right technologies and (continue to) re-shape our services ... COVID-19 is our stimulus for this.
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Thank You, Diolch yn Fawr!

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