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Transforming Aged Care

Towards a future in which digitisation clasps hands with respect, and connection drives improvement

Executive Summary

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> " *The neglect of our aged care residents has gone on for too long. The people who built Australia deserve more protection from their Government. I will act to ensure the sorts of shocking stories we heard during the Aged Care Royal Commission are no longer tolerated."*
>
> Then-Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese, 3 April 2022

Purpose

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety has perhaps shone history's brightest light on the systemic weaknesses and deficiencies of Australia's aged care sector.[1]

The stories it uncovered, of neglect, of disinterest and, above all, of disrespect, were shocking and — in many ways — surprising. Surprising not because isolated reports of deficiencies in care were unknown, but because the overall faltering of the system flew in the face of years of 'person-centric' reform interventions and efforts, and the sector's $20 billion annual Federal investment.[2]

Australia's aged care system provides support for 1.2 million people[3] — it is an essential service — but it is yet to realise our collective hopes for how we treat the people who rely upon it.

And politics has appreciated this, with aged care reform being a major battleground in the recent 2022 Federal election. Policy and system change is coming, there can be no doubt.

What is required is a large-scale system reorientation and transformation — at provider, service, policy and ethical levels. In meeting this challenge, we believe that technology and digitsation have a core — not superficial or ancillary — role to play. Amidst the sea of challenges, the potential for technology in aged care is far deeper and more transformative than might be imagined.

This paper offers some strategic provocations concerning how this can happen. It is written for anyone with an interest in the future of the aged care system, from policy-makers focused on how digital technologies can deliver on the goals of regulatory reform, to aged care providers concerned about the value to be found in digital transformation.

Most importantly, the purpose of this paper is to spur cross-system conversation. Eschewing the traditional siloed approach, we anticipate the report can contribute to the work of researchers, regulators, clinicians, advocates, and the many people engaged in the day-to-day delivery of aged care services in Australia.

> *The aged care system in Australia today has many flaws. There are, no doubt, some instances of wrongful or inappropriate behaviour, but the system as a whole is a product of different elements frequently acting as expected and intended, but not producing the best outcomes for those in need."*
>
> Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, Chair's Preface

A system under pressure

Few would disagree that our aged care system is under pressure — and there are many factors combining to stress the system.

Australia's population is ageing and, as we live longer, more people are requiring aged care, for longer periods. This pressure will only intensify over the next decade.

Simultaneously, the workforce required to serve this increasing population has stagnated. The entire sector is understaffed and by 2030 the staff shortfall is predicted to be 110,000 workers.[4]

In the wake of the Royal Commission, regulation across the sector is changing, further compounding the sector's uncertainty. The change in Federal government has been accompanied by significant new policy proposals: dramatically increasing the staffing requirements in residential aged care; and raising wages across the sector. Perhaps the most striking proposal is to make aged care providers criminally liable for low-quality care.

And finally, amongst all of these pressures, the pandemic — which has proven to be most deadly to those over 60 — has disrupted almost every facet of the aged care system. Simultaneously increasing the care burden and impeding staff recruitment, the pandemic has isolated older Australians from the rest of the community while requiring their carers to shoulder a heavier burden.

A system that demands, yet complicates, digital transformation

In addressing these challenges, technology — and especially digital technology — surely has a central part to play. However, the types of digital services that are commonplace across other industries and sectors have failed to gain traction in aged care.

In producing recommendations for a brighter digital future in aged care, we spoke to leaders and players from across the aged care system in order to gain insight into the lived experience of the system and its operation.

The perspectives gathered helped to uncover four characteristics of the aged care system that are complicating transformation in the system — both digital and otherwise.

1. **Dynamics of government spending to support an ageing population.**

2. **The fragmented landscape of aged care providers, operating with numerous economic pressures.**

3. **The challenges of the silent voice: difficulties for older Australians in advocating for themselves.**

4. **The digital mismatch: digital maturity of aged care providers is not on par with that of older Australians.**

But it doesn't have to be this way. Alternative futures are possible…

Enhancing respect and engendering trust should be the polestar of our reform

For centuries, age was synonymous with experience. Elders were treated with respect, their knowledge invaluable to community survival. Today, however, ageing can be an isolating experience. Frailty and reduced mobility can leave even those still living at home disconnected from the broader community.

Treating older Australians with the respect they deserve — and the respect demanded by the Royal Commission — hinges on their "de"-isolation. It requires a system that can, once again, incorporate them into the centre of daily life.

Accomplishing this will require much — at multiple levels of our system: from carer involvement to workforce dynamics, from care contexts and models to provider operations.

All of this tells us that strategies for digital transformation in aged care must:

1. Be deep rather than superficial;
2. Be systemic rather than piecemeal;
3. Favour the ethical over purely the technical;
4. Positively impact the provider and aged care recipient experience.

Respect requires connection — and digital technologies can 'upgrade' connections across aged care
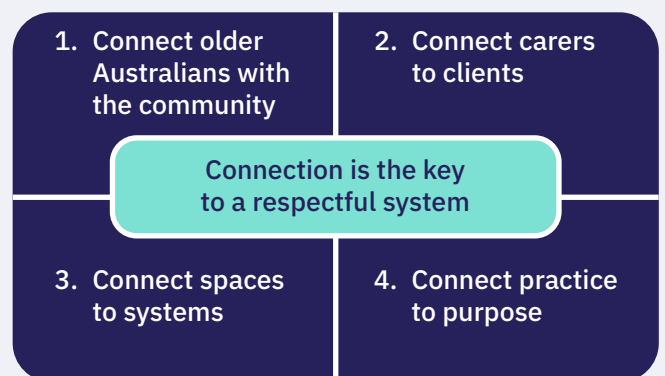
The foundation of a respectful system is one in which people are connected.

Whether it is the recipients of aged care being connected to their families and friends, or aged care workers having the time to genuinely connect with those they care for, respect requires that people be visible, that they be present.

The scaffolding for interpersonal connection is the creation of connected aged care spaces. Connected spaces automate data collection and safety monitoring, turning isolated sites into a cohesive, comprehensible, network.

But most important of all is the connection of practice to purpose; aligning each element of the system, the day-to-day practices of the thousands of people working within it, with the overall purpose of providing respectful aged care to everyone who needs it.

Connection is something digital technologies excel at delivering. And enhancing digital connection offers to 'open up' aged care, making it as simple as possible for all types of information — from video-calling to telehealth; food preferences to statutory reporting — to flow in and out of all the myriad aged care settings.

1. Connect older Australians with the community	2. Connect carers to clients
Connection is the key to a respectful system	
3. Connect spaces to systems	4. Connect practice to purpose

Rethinking aged care as the frontier of digital transformation is a bold objective, but it is foundational to the overall aim of optimising the care provided across the system.

Continuing along the current trajectory will lead to ad hoc digital additions that merely bounce off the surface of the problem.

Striking at the heart of the problem requires a depth of strategy and an awareness that good processes are necessary for good outcomes. To this end, our recommendations cover the types of digital technologies most immediately valuable to aged care, but also highlight the importance of setting in place the processes and resources required to achieve ongoing, meaningful change.

Summary of recommendations

Respect through connection; connection by 'design'

Digitisation can transform aged care, and can do so in a way that is person-centric and that embeds respect.

A framework for tech-entrenched respect is based on connection across four dimensions:

- Connecting older Australians to their community;
- Connecting carers to recipients;
- Connecting aged care spaces to those relying on them; and
- Connecting practice to purpose across the system.

Digital first approach to optimising care and operations

With every new investment, organisations need to consider if there is a digital alternative. Optimising the use and value of digital technologies comes from building their evaluation into every decision-making process.

Not all digital infrastructure is equal

Purposeful digital infrastructure provides secure and private customisation, with everything connected on a resilient network. While connection is the key to respect, security is a prerequisite for maintaining trust in digital systems.

New models and spaces for experimentation are critical

Technology-rich experimentation spaces provide opportunities for advanced prototyping and exploration. Bringing representatives from across the system into simulated experimental spaces can generate new ways of approaching old problems.

The Health Transformation Lab is a collaboration between Cisco and RMIT University — designed to be a place where leaders from across our care systems come to experiment with and solve their thorniest problems at the intersection of practice, policy and technology.

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