Technology and the future of social care

Jun 4, 2021

Life has changed irrevocably in the last few months, and whilst the huge impact on the NHS has been widely recognised, social care has not always received the same media attention. As the sector's national conference gets underway, virtually of course, I want to share Tunstall's experience of working with local authorities during the pandemic, and how, despite the challenges, there have been gains made which could actually improve care delivery in the longer term.

Tunstall was founded on the premise that technology could help to support vulnerable people, keeping them safe and independent, and that remains at the core of our philosophy, more than sixty years later.

Over time, our solutions have become more sophisticated as technology advanced. Whilst there still remains a need for people to be able to press a button to summon help in an emergency, whether living in their own homes, or in group living environments, we now have the ability to provide more intuitive and preventative interventions. For example, fall detectors and bed occupancy sensors can automatically raise an alert if they sense someone may have fallen. We can use discreet sensors around the home which monitor activity, such as how often the bathroom or kitchen are being used, giving a baseline for care planning, and early warning of any potential deterioration in wellbeing. The next step in the evolution of our predictive care technology, Tunstall Cognitive Care, will use data-driven insights from multiple sources to detect whether someone's health could be about to deteriorate, spot a potentially undiagnosed condition, or to help them resolve an immediate social care need. This will enable the delivery of high-quality, personalised care programmes and effectively allocate resources, making sure those in need have the right levels of support and reassurance.

Delivering care remotely has been essential during the pandemic, helping to support people who have been shielding and providing vital support and contact. We have also been working closely with care homes, helping to protect some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Our remote patient monitoring solution has enabled residents' health to be monitored whilst reducing the need for face to face contact, thus reducing the risk of cross infection. The system identifies any cause for concern at an early stage, enabling early intervention. This can help to avoid the need for more complex care, improving outcomes, and for COVID-19 patients, enabling them to be isolated and treated as soon as possible. The system also helps clinicians to effectively prioritise residents' care, as the system clearly identifies those most in need.

Tunstall Carecom has been used slightly differently in care homes during the pandemic, still giving staff the means to communicate effectively throughout the home, but also enabling them to work with residents in bubbles. We've also been working closely with our customers to help them support people in their own homes with telecare, adapting our engineers' working practices to ensure everyone's safety. This kind of 24-hour support has always given reassurance and peace of mind to the people using it and those who care for them, although during the pandemic it has become absolutely vital.

Amidst the challenges of the last few months, there have also been significant achievements. Technology that previously might have taken months to deploy has become active within weeks. Barriers between stakeholders have been overcome. Bureaucracy has been pushed aside.

We have seen a much greater recognition of the benefits of technology in our health and social care system, and a willingness to try new approaches. This not only addresses some of the issues presented by the current pandemic, but also helps to make our services more resilient, preventive, and person-centred in the longer term. I believe this is a trend that will continue, and that technology and data will feature much more prominently in the way we design services in coming years.

The current crisis will abate, but the demands on our social care system will continue to grow; now is the time for us to create the foundation for a better future.