Social networking may prove key to overcoming isolation of older adults

May 23 2011

Online social networking could help overcome isolation among older Australians.

The University of Sydney is leading an investigation into the use of online social networking tools and other information technologies by older Australians as a means of combating social isolation and increasing community engagement of seniors.

"Advances in medical and assistive technologies, along with developments that assist older adults to age-in-place in their own home imply that not just poor health but also social isolation are challenges that need to be addressed for overall healthy ageing," says Professor Robert Steele, the project leader and Chair of Health Informatics.

"With the proportion of people aged over 65 predicted to double over the next 40 years, it's essential that we examine ways we can support and enable older adults to live 'interdependently'."

The multi-disciplinary research team, drawn from across the disciplines of health informatics, aging, community health and occupational therapy, believe that information technologies may facilitate new modes of social interaction.

The study will ascertain current levels of technology usage of seniors and baby boomers before giving participants an introduction to social networking technologies including Facebook, Instant Messaging, Skype and Twitter. It will also include up-skilling in common technological devices such as mobile phones and MP3 players.

Focus groups, diaries and other qualitative methods, including data generated by social networking will then be used to document and analyse the experience of participants.

The influence of variables such as age, gender, ethnic and cultural background, working status and level of independence or disability will also be taken into account.

As the first major study of its kind, it's hard to predict specific aspects of the adoption of information and communication technology and the impact increased exposure will have on older Australians.

"Potentially we might see that using these types of technologies might assist older adults to further engage in an active role in society for a longer period of time," says Professor Steele.

"This could translate to participation in clubs or volunteering for community activities. Such activities can provide an important way for

those wishing to, to maintain a healthy social network as they age."

The collaborative project, funded under the NSW government Office of Ageing, Applied Research Grant program will bring together a consortium of leading researchers from the University of Sydney's Faculty of Health Sciences and the peak NSW community bodies for technology and older adults.

Ms. Nan Bosler, President of the Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association, a human services non-government organization member of the project, indicates "The project promises to be an exciting collaboration between the university and the lead community groups."

Provided by University of Sydney