

Carers Australia submission to Human Rights and Technology Issues Paper

Carers Australia congratulates the Australian Human Rights Commission on developing a very thoughtful, balanced and timely Issues Paper on the relationship between emerging technologies and human rights.

As might be expected, our key focus is on the impact of new technologies on the life chances of people with disability or chronic illness or who are frail aged, and on their family and friend carers.

The benefits of technologies which are able to help people with disability to lead more independent, fulfilling and normal lives are well documented and canvassed in the Issues Paper. The same benefits can transform the lives of their family and friend carers. Direct benefit to carers include improvement to their own health (especially when the technology reduces the physical exertion often required of carers) and the ability to have more time to attend to their own needs. Monitoring devices in particular can be a great boon to carers. They can free carers from one of the more wearing aspects of the caring role: the maintenance of constant vigilance to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the person being cared for. In some cases, access to these technologies can mean the difference between carers being able to maintain employment or giving up work to care.

The Issues Paper asks: What opportunities and challenges currently exist for people with disability accessing technology? It also asks: What, if any, policy and other changes are needed in Australia to promote accessibility to new technology?

In this context we note that the establishment of the NDIS has opened new opportunities on a national basis for people who meet the eligibility requirements to access technology. As with other areas of NDIS implementation, the transition period has not always gone smoothly, with complaints coming from participants and carers about the knowledge of planners, approval processes, the adequacy of prices and the length of time it takes to access the approved technology. Our hope is that these are teething problems which will be addressed as the NDIS fully rolls out.

However, the major problem in terms of equity of access to technology is in relation to those people with disability under the age of 65 who do not qualify for NDIS packages because their condition is not

severe enough or permanent, and those Australians over the age of 65 with disabilities and chronic illnesses who are not eligible for the NDIS. With reference to aged care, responsibility for providing access to assistive technologies is split between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, with different funding subsidies and programs across jurisdictions. The National Aged Care Alliance (NACA) Position Paper on Assistive Technologies for Older Australian recommends:

- establishment of a national assistive technology program through a COAG process
- greater investment in assistive technology for the aged assigned for not only the purchase/hire/loan of the equipment but also the specialised assessment and training (where required) to deliver a complete solution
- clearer funding and program responsibilities across jurisdictions.¹

Another theme explored in the Issues Paper which is of particular concern to carers is ICT accessibility and digital inclusion. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2015 Survey of Disability and Carers (SDAC) indicates that carers are more likely than non-carers to have lower incomes, not be in the labour market, have lower levels of education, and likely to have a disability or illness themselves.² This means that they are disproportionately represented in the groups with low digital inclusion identified in Telstra's most recent Australian Digital Inclusion Index Report, and that gap is widening.³ A great many carers rely on government and community services and on government payments, which are overwhelmingly accessed through digital channels. In fact, 42.7 percent of primary carers rely on government pensions or allowances as their main source of income.⁴

Against this background Carers Australia is pleased that, as identified in the Issues Paper, part of the Digital Transformation Agency's (DTA) remit is to ensure that Commonwealth Government digital services are simple, clear, fast and accessible to all users, regardless of their ability or environment. This includes users with low level digital skills, people with disability and culturally and linguistically diverse people. It is worth noting that the Department of Human Services (DHS) has consulted with Carers Australia and other community sector organisations in developing its ethics framework to inform the Welfare Payments Infrastructure Transformation (WPIT) project. This has included acknowledging that not everyone will use online channels and those people should not be excluded, and that vulnerable people will need to be supported.

¹http://www.naca.asn.au/Publications/NACA_Assistive_Technology_for_Older_Australians_Position_Paper.pdf

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Australia's Welfare 2017*

³ Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Cook, K, Louie, YM & Holcombe-James, I, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2018, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2018*, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra, p 6

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABC), *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC)*, 2015

Carers Australia looks forward to the Discussion Paper arising from this consultation. For further information regarding this submission, please contact our [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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