Designing Technology that Cares

Written by Kristian Partington

Technological innovation has always had the potential to impact support systems for older adults and those who care for them, either in the community or in long-term care/retirement settings. The challenge in designing new technologies or improving upon existing ones, however, is doing so with the needs of both care partners in mind.

Addressing this shortfall was the reason behind a three-day workshop hosted by the RIA in June, which drew together more than 40 people, including industry experts, researchers, students, paid caregivers and seven family care partners.

Focused solely on how technology might be designed to be more considerate of care partner needs as well as its impact on the care partner relationship, Designing Technology that Cares was spearheaded by Dr. Jennifer Boger, the RIA’s Schlegel Research Chair in Technology for Independent Living.

“There was a little bit of frustration,” Dr. Boger says, recalling a conversation she had...
with colleagues last fall at an AGE-WELL conference in Montreal. “Technologies aimed at caregivers are mostly focused on how to help the carer provide better care to the recipient. Not that that shouldn’t be a focus – of course it should – but they tend to ignore the fact that carers are whole people with other passions in life: hobbies, jobs and a need for time for themselves.”

The perspective of care partners is of critical importance, she says, which is why each family care partner invited to the workshop played such a key role in its success.

Mary Buhr-Nightingale has often thought that people and organizations don’t realize the depth of care a loved one gives or how much their work is undervalued. Her husband Don survived a stroke in early 2014 and now makes his home at the Village at University Gates in Waterloo, and Mary is still a central figure in his care team. The expertise and optimism she offered workshop attendees, along with her fellow care partners, was exactly the perspective Dr. Boger was hoping to tap into.

“This workshop gave me hope for the future,” Mary says, “because it concentrated on the caregivers and what their role is and how this information can be used to assist the role of the caregiver and further help the person cared for.”

Mary says she appreciated the fact that instead of a keynote address, she and her fellow care partners each offered their individual stories for consideration at the beginning of the event.

“Each story was different,” she says, “all very moving and touching and very powerful.”

Through three days of collaborative discussion, those who are at the forefront of assistive technology design gained a new appreciation and focus on the care partner relationship. At least 12 knowledge mobilization projects are now being developed, creating several opportunities across Canada and beyond for innovators and designers to learn from the insights offered at this unique workshop.