

ABSTRACT

Futures Policy Promoting Independent Living of Elderly People and Gerontechnology

Since 1996 the Committee for the Future has organised and co-ordinated the Technology Assessment projects of the Parliament of Finland. The main task of the Committee for the Future is to promote the Futures Policy of the Parliament and first of all to evaluate and reply to the Government's futures related reports. Parliament deliberates the Committee's reports in the plenary sessions and adopts them with possible amendments, whereupon they become resolutions of Parliament binding on the Government. The target of the parliamentary TA has been to provide information concerning the effects of science and new technology on society in a form suitable for MPs. More information about the Committee and its other TA activities can be found on the Internet: <http://www.eduskunta.fi/FutureCommittee>.

The assessment process of gerontechnology in the Parliament started in the autumn of 1998. Gerontechnology is defined as a composite of two words "gerontology", the scientific study of ageing, and "technology", research and development of techniques and products (Graafmans et al. 1998). A Steering Group of six MPs was appointed for the assessment project. The Vice-Chairperson of the Committee, Tarja Filatov, was the first Chairperson of the Steering Group. Later this role was assumed by the new Vice-Chairperson of the Committee, Kalevi Olin, when MP Filatov became the Minister of Labour in Spring 2000.

Finland is ageing quickly. In 2000, there were about 5 adults of working age (15 - 64 years) per one elderly person (over 65 years) in Finland. It has been evaluated that this number will fall to about 4 in 2010 and only about 3 in 2020. It has been realised by the Parliament of Finland that a Futures Policy related to the ageing population is urgently needed. Four viewpoints motivated the assessment of gerontechnology especially related to the independent living of elderly people:

- 1) Many surveys have shown that old people like to live at their homes as long as possible.
- 2) During the economic crisis in the 1990s, savings by many Finnish municipalities resulted in the low quality of services for old people. Recently, the low quality of care for the old people has been the focus of intensive political debate in Finland.
- 3) In the next ten years the so called "large generations" born after 1945 will be 60 years old. The services for old people are now very much provided by these generations. How long will the large generations continue in those professional or informal services? How will the large generations manage when they will be in their 80s in the 2030s? What role would the foreign labour force play in providing the services for old people in the future?
- 4) There are very promising new technologies available which might help the independent living of old people.

This final report of the assessment is mainly focused on the third point and its connections with the use of gerontechnology. Besides this general Futures Policy oriented focus, elaborated for example with alternative scenarios, the report summarises contributions published in three other reports in Finnish: a prestudy and two special studies concerning the assessment of safety alarm systems for old people and the assessment of Internet-based systems for self-help.

This report includes the final conclusions of the Committee for the Future based on the assessment. The Committee accepted the following general objectives:

- The main target of the geronpolicy should be the independent living of elderly people. The special focus of the policy should be positive contacts between elderly people and between different generations.
- The use of gerontechnology should be based on the long-term and comprehensive Futures Policy. Technological choices and social choices should be treated together.
- The exhaustion of the large generations is a big problem both for professional and informal services for old people. Rehabilitation of the large generations is needed.
- More porous working life in general and especially more porous jobs in services for old people are needed. The porosity of a job means that the job is managed with less haste, with more people and with better opportunities for workers' family lives and leisure activities. A more porous working life will enable more informal work and is beneficial e.g. for the acceptance of immigration.
- It is important to continuously discuss the ethical aspects of both the gerontechnology and the social choices related to the independent living of elderly people.

Legislation and pilots were suggested as means to meet the above objectives. The Committee for the Future proposed a pilot of Internet aided gerontechnology (e.g. e-health portals) for the rehabilitation of the large generations. Another pilot was suggested concerning the use of foreign people in the caring services of elderly people. It was suggested, that the Parliament should continuously follow these macro pilots and make decisions based on their results.

An objective of the TA processes of the Parliament is to have common learning processes for MPs and other stakeholders who are relevant in making technological choices. In the assessment process of gerontechnology, a way to promote common dialogue was based on weighted assessment criteria. Using a Likert scale from 0 to 5 MPs of the Committee for the Future evaluated the relative relevance of used assessment criteria. The criteria have been used both in the selection of special assessment issues and in comparisons between alternative technological options.

Based on the evaluation of the MPs, the importance rating of the assessment criteria was as follows:

1. The choice of the technology promotes positive communication and co-operation between elderly people and between elderly people and other age groups.
2. The choice of the technology promotes elderly people's daily activities at home and their travelling outdoors.
3. The choice of the technology promotes prevention and care of diseases.
4. The choice of the technology lightens the care burden of relatives and professional care personnel.
5. The choice of the technology promotes the use of banking services, shopping and other personal services.

6. The technology results in products which are export successes.
7. The choice of the technology promotes social participation, influence and respect of elderly people.
8. The choice of the technology promotes the use of cultural services and recreation for elderly people.
9. The choice of the technology is economically profitable for communities, which organise services.

Using the above criteria, e.g. five types of alternative security equipment and related services were compared. Although the main focus of the assessment was technology available in 2010, the following recently available choices were evaluated first:

- A. Security “watch” with a button for alarming care personnel.
- B. Intelligent security “watch”. A piece of equipment like a watch which continuously monitors the health condition of the person, measuring e.g. activity, skin temperature and pulse. The security watch communicates continuously with a computer. The computer is able to alarm automatically if the monitoring results are critical. The monitored person can also use a button to alert care personnel.
- C. Mobile phone tailored for elderly people. The available equipment is a commercial version of the More Phone developed in an EU development project. The outlook of the equipment is like that of recent mobile phones e.g. of Nokia. There is a clearly visible button on the phone for issuing alarms and connecting the person to a care centre. The equipment also includes e.g. a GPS system for locating the person.
- D. Home security centre. Different pieces of equipment at home (e.g. cooker, carpet, bed) are connected to a security centre, which issues alarms based on critical behaviour. A security phone without the health monitoring capability is also available.
- E. Neighbouring help. Relatives or other helping persons live so close to the old person that they can help and issue alarms in emergency situations.

For example, the interviewed experts evaluated that the tailored mobile phone is better than the intelligent security watch in criteria 1, 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9. The security watch was evaluated as better in criteria 3 and 4.