

# Windows on the World: Expanding the View from the Nursing Home

**Jennifer S. Kay**  
 Computer Science Department  
 Rowan University  
 Glassboro, NJ 08028 USA  
 +1 609 256 4593  
 kay@rowan.edu

**Patricia A. J. Kay**  
 Center for Aging  
 University of Medicine & Dentistry of NJ  
 School of Osteopathic Medicine  
 Stratford, NJ 08084  
 +1 609 566 6843  
 kay@umdnj.edu

## ABSTRACT

About 5% of the US elderly population are institutionalized. Many of these individuals have limited mobility and feel very isolated from the outside world. They often have an acute sense of their loss of independence. While not being a panacea, we believe that the ability to access the Internet community can help to foster a feeling of self-worth and connection to the world around them.

## Keywords

Computers and the Elderly, Long Term Care, Elderly Independence

## INTRODUCTION

The baby boomer generation is aging. By the year 2010 it is expected that 13.3% of the US population will be over 65, and of those 39.7 million older adults, 5.7 million will be over 85. [1]

About 5% of the US elderly population are institutionalized. Many of these individuals have limited mobility and feel very isolated from the outside world. Lack of stimulation may be detrimental to both physical and mental health. Spector and Takada found that nursing home residents who participated, even moderately, in activities were less likely to decline or die when compared with residents with lower levels of participation. [2]

Access to the outside world for the institutional elderly has consisted mainly of volunteer programs (e.g. visiting youth choirs), occasional outings, and television. Most of these are passive activities, and do not produce a sense of accomplishment or self-worth.

Anecdotal accounts of older people using the Internet seem to indicate that the elderly are interested and adapt to the technology. There are reports in the media of elderly friends thousands of miles apart coming to each other's aid.

We believe that the quality of life of all older individuals can be improved with minimal education in the use of the Internet and the provision of easy access. The Internet has the potential to expand avenues to life long education, improved physical and mental health and safety, and socialization.

## EDUCATION

There are many opportunities on the Internet for continuing education. Most community educational resources already provide free lifelong learning opportunities to the senior population. In addition, many courses are available on the Internet; the choice depends on the interests of the individual.

In addition to the almost infinite range of subjects, also included in this category is education about their individual rights as residents in an institutional setting. The Internet enables individuals to communicate directly with those authorities charged with oversight of nursing homes as well as with their legislators.

While nursing home residents may be encouraged to vote, in general those seeking political office do not canvas this population. But access to on-line editions of local and national newspapers as well as political web-sites may make this population more enfranchised.

## PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

In order to maintain function, both physical and mental activity is required. Even the best facilities can only provide stimulation geared to the typical resident, many individuals may not feel sufficiently interested to participate at that level.

While the potential for the Internet to stimulate physical health is limited, the opportunity to follow a personal interest in depth produces an improvement in mood and secondarily an improvement in physical well being.

Long term health care regulations require that each resident be seen by their primary care physician once a month. In between these brief visits, questions arise. In general, the residents access to the physician is through the nursing

home staff. As more and more physicians go on-line, access to e-mail and the Internet can mean better access to one's doctor. Web sites such as the National Council on Aging ([www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org)) and SeniorNet ([www.seniornet.org](http://www.seniornet.org)) also provide health information.

#### **SOCIALIZATION**

There are multiple forums and chat rooms available on the net. A brief survey of Internet providers such as AOL shows several well-patronized chat rooms specifically targeted at older adults.

#### **CONCLUSION**

While we have centered our discussion on nursing home residents, we believe that there is an urgent need to expand

and encourage public and private access to the Internet among the well elderly. This serves two functions. First, as a preventive measure with all of the benefits described above. And in addition, establishes a well-entrenched skill that becomes a part of one's daily life that is not lost should one have to move to a more restrictive setting.

#### **REFERENCES**

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