Briefing Paper: What is Telecare?   May 2006

Some words have subtle and intricate meanings which cannot be encapsulated in a short definition. Simanek D, Lock Haven University, 2004

What is 'telecare'?

Defining telecare in the current UK social and health service context is a rich and troublesome source of debate. The word is not found in ordinary dictionaries and, if it were, the published definitions would probably be out of date. To complicate matters, 'telecare' is used quite differently in other contexts and some people also use other terms, such as 'electronic assistive technology' and 'preventative technology'.

Part of the problem for anyone who wants to define telecare is that equipment devices are inseparable from the systems that provide appropriate and timely responses to information from them.
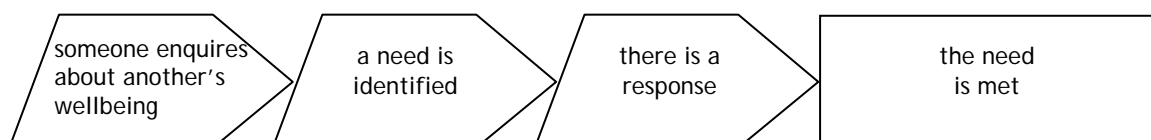
There are three ways of trying to understand what is meant. These are by:
1. listing telecare equipment
2. delving a little into the meaning of its component parts: 'tele' and 'care'
3. considering definitions that have been proposed, and thinking about their implications

The first way can be dismissed quickly, for three reasons. First, it is impossible to arrive at any consensus, as the Department of Health's Telecare Policy Collaborative found out at its very first meeting. Second, any list will quickly date and third, it provides no help in deciding whether something new should be included or not. In short, it is too contentious and too inflexible a method.

The second way deserves some attention as it may offer some insights. The 'tele' part is easy, it comes from ancient Greek, meaning 'far away'. But what is 'care' (other than in its meaning of 'a worry')? Generally, it is taken to mean assistance with things that you cannot do yourself. However, to be 'cared for' has unwelcome overtones as it implies a loss of independence and many people feel that 'care' in this context is patronising — that what they require is a service, not care.

However, to feel 'cared about' is a basic human need, and the feeling of being cared about has four inseparable components:

someone enquires about another's wellbeing ⟩ a need is identified ⟩ there is a response ⟩ the need is met

If this chain fails at any point, the sensation of being cared about does not occur. So how does this help with the definition of 'telecare'? It gets us thinking along the lines that telecare is a system that includes the response. We can also construe the characteristics of telecare as being something that, from a distance: seeks out information about the person's wellbeing, identifies a need and triggers a response that meets the need.

Turning attention now to three of the most commonly-used definitions of telecare, it is fair to warn the reader that this section is rather tortuous. It reflects the troublesome nature of this debate alluded to above.

First definition:
> 'Telecare is care provided at a distance using information and communication technology (ICT)'. (Source: The Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to Support Independent Living for Older and Disabled People. 2002, Curry R, Tinoco, M, Wardle D.)

Also, apart from the question mark over the word 'care', and whether it can be provided over a distance, the essential element of technologically-triggered response is missing from this definition. Information and communication technology includes the standard telephone which most people in this field would not class as a telecare device as such. To be fair, the limitations of this definition were clear to the authors who then went on to elaborate its meaning with explanation and examples. This definition was quoted in the ICES *Getting Started with Telecare* pack January 2005, now superseded by the CSIP *Telecare Implementation Guide*, which has dropped this definition and offers instead the older definition: 'The remote or enhanced delivery of health and social services to people in their own home by means of telecommunications and computerised systems'. (Reference: (Barnes, N.M, Edwards, Rose, D.A.D, Garner, P. *Lifestyle monitoring – technology for supported independence.* IEE Computing and Control Engineering Journal. Vol 9, No 4 (1998))

This is not my preferred definition.

Second definition:
> 'Telecare is the continuous, automatic and remote monitoring of real time emergencies and lifestyle changes over time in order to manage the risks associated with independent living.' (Quoted in the above ICES *Getting Started with Telecare* pack, and used, unattributed, in a Tunstall document on dementia, and on the (predominantly telehealth) Amax Telecare company website. Actual origin yet to be determined.)

This is currently my preferred definition because it tells you:
a) what the technology does (remote monitoring, automatically and continuously)
b) what is being monitored (emergencies, but it can also be lifestyle changes over time)
c) why it is being monitored (to manage the risks associated with independent living). The latter implicitly covers the response because without appropriate responses, the risks cannot be managed.

Third definition:
> 'Telecare is as much about the philosophy of dignity and independence as it is about equipment and services. Equipment is provided to support the individual in their [sic] home and tailored to meet their needs. It can be as simple as the basic community alarm service ... It can include detectors or monitors ... that trigger a warning to a response centre.' *Building Telecare in England* Department of Health 2005.

This is less a definition than some high-level examples of what telecare does and what it should aim to achieve. (It also goes on to define telemedicine as a form of telecare.) Many working in the telecare field query the inclusion of 'the basic community alarm service' in this definition because there is the sense that community alarm services still tend to be rooted in the tradition of using pendant or voice alarms triggered by the person, although this is changing in many places as they update their systems. It was owing to shortcomings with

person-triggered devices that the automatic monitoring and alarm raising devices were developed by the alarm manufacturers and it is the automatic (or passive) characteristic that most people think is the defining element of 'telecare'.

Conclusion

This briefing paper has set out some of the problems around defining telecare.

It will be a pity if, as telehealth technology gains a firmer foothold, the term 'telecare' becomes further confused by its continued application in the telehealth arena.

Although I am confidently predicting that telecare and telehealth technologies will merge, and although the clients and patients they benefit are often one and the same individuals, it is still useful — that is, less confusing in this stage of technological and linguistic evolution — to maintain a difference in the terms.

However, it is possible and perhaps desirable at this time, to work with a fairly loose concept of telecare. Just as people want entertainment, not necessarily a TV, some people also need a service that helps them to stay independent, with dignity. The technology should only be one means to that end.

So, with a working definition and a loose concept, one feels that 'telecare' is a bit like the season of Spring: it difficult to pin down, but you know it when it is happening.

Steve Hards
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About Telecare Aware

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Telecare Aware © is a free information service to help keep you up-to-date in what is happening in telehealth and telecare around the world. It is a web presence of Steve Hards, trading as Briarwood1000.

Steve Hards has been an independent consultant in the health and social services sector since 1992. For over seven years his principal client was the UK Government's Department of Health which used him to manage numerous projects, including the Integration of Community Equipment Services (ICES) between 2001 and 2005. In 2004 he also organised the Telecare Policy Collaborative — a major experiment in policy development, bringing together, and working with, over 60 stakeholder organisations.

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