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At 94, Grandma Lea could not live alone anymore but wanted to stay at home. In our ageing society, many elderly people are in the same situation. Robotics offers a safe and affordable solution.

[1]

An EU-funded team, @giraffplus [2] has developed the GiraffPlus [3] system; a robot assists older people in their homes, connects them to family, friends and healthcare professionals, while wearable devices and sensors throughout the home keep an eye on the person's health and activities. The system should be in commercial production by the end of 2015. The EU market for robots and devices assisting our older people is estimated to reach €13 billion by 2016.

"People ask why I don't just live with my daughter, but she has grandchildren of her own and many new responsibilities. With this valuable assistant that I call 'Mr Robin' I'm more relaxed about the years ahead, and so are my children and grandchildren", explains 94-year-old Lea Mina Ralli, also known as Grandma – 'nonna' in Italian – Lea. She has been using the GiraffPlus system for 5 months and often writes about 'Mr Robin' on her blog [4] (in Italian).

€3 million of EU funding was invested in GiraffPlus to test how robots and other devices could help older people live safer, more independent lives. The system includes sensors and a robot. The sensors are designed to detect activities like cooking, sleeping or watching television and monitor health – blood pressure or sugar levels for example. They allow the person's carers to monitor their wellbeing remotely and to check for falls. A robot moves around the home and allows family, friends and carers to virtually visit the person.

Silver generation and economy

Vice-President of the European Commission @NeelieKroesEU [5], responsible for the Digital Agenda [6], says: "None of us is getting any younger. But we all want to know that we will not lose our dignity, respect and independence as we age. The EU is investing in new technology that can support the silver generation – adding not just years to our life, but also life to our years!"

Europe's over-65s have a disposable income of over €3,000 billion and much of this will be ploughed back into the caring economy. According to Stephen Von Rump, CEO of Giraff Technologies AB, the EU market for robots and other devices assisting of our elderly will reach €13 billion by 2016.

"GiraffPlus will be in 15 homes by the end of 2014", says Amy Loutfi, the project coordinator based at Örebro University [7], Sweden. "So far we have had six homes in Europe – two homes each in Spain, Sweden and Italy – that have lived with the GiraffPlus system. We currently are in the middle of the evaluations, but we see that various aspects of the system are appreciated differently by the different users. This goes to show that a one-size fits all approach to technology at home is not necessarily the best, and technology should be both adaptable and tailored to user's needs".

Current plans are to put the system into commercial production next year, based on an upfront fee and monthly subscriptions which would make it competitive when set alongside increasingly expensive full-time care.

The GiraffPlus consortium [8] includes public and private partners from Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and UK.

See also:
CORDIS [9]
Project:
Combing social interaction and long term monitoring for promoting independent living
Project Acronym:
Giraff+
Project website:
http://www.giraffplus.eu [10]
Read full text [11]
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