

Report on the 2021 International Day of Older Persons event

To celebrate the International Day of Older Persons 2021, Age-Friendly North East Victoria and Upper Hume Primary Care Partnership hosted an online conversation: *Physically distant, socially connected: Navigating real world and digital connections*.

The event was held by Zoom on Thursday 30 September from 10 am to 11.30 am and was facilitated by Dr Kathleen Brasher.

Event Recordings

An audio recording of the event can be found on our [Age-friendly North East Victoria](#) page.

A video recording of the event can be found on [YouTube](#).

Background

This year's UN International Day of Older Persons focused on digital equity. Australians of all ages are increasingly interacting online as a source of entertainment and social connection, to work or find work, shop, access health care, and seek out information and services—a process accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Emerging from this is the concept of a “digital divide”, where groups of people, such as older Australians and those in rural areas, may have difficulty accessing these digital experiences due to a range of factors including skill level, confidence and motivation as well as affordability, accessibility and quality of internet connections.

Age-friendly North East Victoria and Upper Hume Primary Care Partnership hosted an online forum to consider how older people navigate both an online and physical world. The forum celebrated ageing, placing the voices of older people in the North East at its centre with a panel reflecting the diversity of older people in the region and their experiences.

Panellists

Opening remarks were provided by Dr Jane Barratt, Secretary General, International Federation on Ageing. We thank Jane for her time and generous commitment to support our work.

The panel featured local community members:

- Coral Love, Mudgegonga resident with experience working with communities across Australia
- Jenny Steer, volunteer at the Wangaratta Digital Hub
- Rod Farr, President U3A Albury Wodonga

Audience

A total of 91 people registered for the event with slightly more people from outside North East Victoria registered. Notable was the number of local government staff with responsibility for age-friendly strategies (however named). We thank Jan Bruce and the Municipal Association of Victoria's Positive Ageing Network for their support. The event had 63 people participate on the day.

Key Themes

The conversation covered a wide range of topics that can be summarised into four key themes.

1. Brief digital contact maintains deeper connections and bridges the COVID divide

Panellists spoke about the way they personally use digital technologies as well as sharing stories from other community members.

Social connection is often fostered through brief interactions that help maintain deeper relationships and bridge the divide created by COVID restrictions. This can come in the form of taking a selfie and sending it to adult children to let them know what they are up to, video calls for birthdays or taking photos of interesting flowers and sharing these via email with friends. These interactions exist alongside video conversations with grandchildren who live outside the region or the state.

This illustrates the way that digital technologies can create a new, less formal way for older people to connect with family and friends. Importantly, these interactions can occur more frequently and help maintain relationships in the time between face-to-face catch-ups, which may occur less frequently when family and friends live interstate or are separated due to COVID restrictions.

2. Digital social connection is about more than just keeping in touch

However, digital social connection for older people is more than just keeping in touch, serving more practical purposes.

At an individual and community level, connecting online supports safety and grassroots emergency responses. Where older people live or work alone, being able to send a quick message to family or friends to say everything is okay after a day working on a farm, for example, acts as a way to increase safety and can enable others to act quickly if something goes wrong. At the community level, Coral spoke of grassroots emergency planning within her district where community members had all purchased UHF radios to maintain contact during bushfires and an email list is used to organise radio practice sessions in the lead up to the bushfire season.

Digital social connection is also fostered through education at U3A Albury Wodonga. Digital technologies were described by Rod as a 'saviour' of U3A Albury Wodonga as U3A works on the principal of socialisation through education and, if U3A can't connect, they can't educate. Rod spoke of the success of U3A Albury Wodonga rapidly transitioning to online classes.

3. Older people adapt to changing digital technologies but the environment must be supportive for this to happen

Panellists shared experiences on the way their communities had adapted to digital technologies as well as their thoughts on what needs to be in place for this process to be made as easy as possible.

In her opening remarks, Jane emphasised the importance of not just knowledge and digital skills for digital inclusion, but also an environment that enables this knowledge and skills to be built. This includes access to technologies, infrastructure such as connectivity and good quality connections to support the use of technologies, and the design of technology as well as trust.

With U3A Albury Wodonga's rapid move to online classes, a supportive environment was created through the use of "Zoom Masters". The four Zoom Masters were members of U3A Albury Wodonga who had some expertise in using Zoom and volunteered to provide support to tutors to run their classes online. Over the year, 17 classes transitioned online and around two-thirds of members maintained engagement. This technical support has also seen overall digital skills improve across the U3A Albury Wodonga membership.

Both Rod and Jenny noted that a supportive environment was created when people teaching digital skills understood the motivations and what older people wanted to achieve by using online technologies. From her perspective as a volunteer at the Wangaratta Digital Hub, Jenny felt that understanding what community members wanted to achieve online and building their comfort and confidence with these processes was key. Jenny adopted the mantra that a person's online skills are "only as good as the person teaching you" and draws from her own experience as being someone who was a late adopter of social media as well as sharing the experiences of other older people who have more recently picked up a laptop, tablet or smart phone. Patience, repetition and refresher sessions were also critical to building confidence and trust in navigating the online world.

For some community members, however, particularly those with cognitive impairment, memory loss or physical disability, or who live in residential aged care facilities, supportive adaptations and the involvement of aged care staff are important. This may be in the form of adaptations that can hold a smart phone or tablet and reduce the need for the user to lift the device or engaging staff to set up connections and accept or make video calls with family members. This highlights the need for aged care staff to have practical skills in navigating these devices as well as recognising the important role that online social connection plays for residents.

The functioning of devices was also noted as a critical element in building digital inclusion and participation. Often older people are provided with "hand-me-down" devices when family members upgrade their own technology. However, as these devices are older and out of date, their functioning is reduced, they are less intuitive to use and, in some cases, access is limited when passwords have not been provided by family members. The impact of reduced functioning is that devices are harder for a less experienced person to learn on and build their confidence.

4. Digital inclusion for older people requires both top-down and bottom-up leadership

Panellists agreed that improving digital inclusion and equity for older people needs grassroots leadership and strong policy directions from state and federal governments. As digital participation and inclusion becomes an increasingly fundamental need, policy is required by state and federal governments and the voices of older people need to be at the forefront. However, increased digital participation and inclusion cannot be entirely left to policy, and grassroots action is required. This can be driven by local governments and community groups and organisations, such as U3As, neighbourhood houses and libraries partnering and having a dedicated focus on digital inclusion for older people. This is particularly important in rural areas where older people may live alone and have limited access to face-to-face interactions.

Tips for building digital skills and confidence

The panel offered a range of tips and suggestions that can help build digital skills and confidence in older community members:

- Share examples of other older people using digital technology or navigating the online world to illustrate what can be done online as well as building confidence that everyone can use a digital device and get online.
- Go at their pace and recognise that repetition is critical. Some community members may not use their devices or go online frequently, so skills and confidence may decrease, and refresher sessions may be required.
- Find out what they want to achieve and what their motivation is to get online. Some may simply want to send a photo via text message on their smart phone, while others may want to learn Zoom to participate in an online course. Understanding their goals will guide what skills they need.

- Encourage people to practise skills on friends and family, using them as “guinea pigs”. This might be sending test emails to children or practising making a video call to grandchildren.
- Emphasise that you don’t need to respond to every person who contacts you, open every file that arrives in your inbox or click every link that comes to you. For less experienced people, being contacted directly online can feel invasive or feel like a response is required, like a knock at the front door or a phone call on a landline. Family members are also a great resource to check in with about potential scams or unexpected contacts.

Resources

Panellists and the audience provided additional resources on the topic, which are provided below:

[Age-friendly North East Victoria](#) initiative

[International Federation on Ageing 15th Global Conference](#) online November 2021: 'Rights Matter'

[UN Decade of Healthy Ageing Platform](#)

[Loneliness and Quality of Life in Older Adults: The Mediating Role of Depression](#)

[Technology and older people: findings from the VicHealth Indicators Survey](#)

[Be Connected](#) is an Australia-wide initiative empowering all Australians to thrive in a digital world.

[Scamwatch](#) is run by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. It provides information to consumers and small businesses about how to recognise, avoid and report scams.

[Tips for accessing proof of COVID vaccination](#) (from UHPCP Facebook page)

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