In the last few decades Asia Pacific countries are experiencing rapidly ageing populations together with life expectancy increases. This is occurring coupled with rapid, transformative, social changes linked to technological innovations. It has become increasingly commonplace for people to use a variety of digital tools for consumer services ranging from banking and retail to entertainment and travel.

Accessing healthcare through digital technologies is becoming commonplace. Patients pivot between offline and online in their health journey and health information storage. So, it is imperative that every person, regardless of age, has the capacity to access and utilise digital communications and technologies effectively and efficiently.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the significance of telemedicine: delivering care at a distance, while simultaneously enabling access to timely and cost-effective healthcare services. Where a doctor is unavailable, telemedicine enables older persons to seek expert advice while at home. This is also useful for people with disabilities and those suffering from mobility issues. In Asian countries with a huge urban/rural divide, telemedicine helps rural communities by cutting travel costs and wage losses.

In developing countries, the younger generations are more likely to have a smartphone, internet connectivity and a healthy knowledge of how to use digital technologies. Therefore, governments should take the necessary steps to raise the digital skills of older persons so that they can access relevant and timely health information and, in turn, take better control of their lives.

Firstly, digital infrastructure should be established keeping in mind how older persons might be encouraged to access it. Secondly, governments, industry and schools could offer basic digital literacy information through community volunteers who visit older persons to help them learn simple digital tools. Thirdly, there could be a collaboration between governments and the private sector to ensure low cost internet access or even ex gratia access, so as many older persons as possible become digitally
connected. Fourthly, smartphones should be kept affordable since older persons are more likely to be living on their savings.

Because women are disproportionately represented among those with less education, efforts to encourage their use of digital technologies should be gender-sensitive. Community digital literacy projects and programmes should take into account that older women have less access to the internet and fewer own mobile phones than older men do. Overcoming these challenges should ensure that older women and men are on an equal footing and equally reap the benefits of digital tools.

Boosting technological inclusivity should be the priority of governments in the Asia Pacific in coming years. Population ageing continues to sweep across the region. Knowledge is power; and reinforcing the rights of older persons to participate in the digital world serves to empower them.

(446 words)

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