

OLDER AND WISER: Robots will be key to future of elder care

[Margaret Coates](#) / North Shore News

December 9, 2016 02:44 PM

Older and
WISER
Margaret Coates



When you get up on Christmas morning will you find a robot vacuum cleaner under the tree?

When you replace your car in the future will you buy a self-driving or autonomous vehicle? When you need home care will you get a robot to help you, or when you make the move to a care home will you have a robot care aid?

Ruchir Sharma, chief global strategist at Morgan Stanley Investment Management, [wrote earlier this month in the Washington Post \(http://washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/12/02/robots-wont-kill-the-workforce-theyll-save-the-global-economy/?utm_term=.113cfd4186da\)](#) that “whether by design or accident, many of the countries with the most rapidly aging populations already have the most robots.” Sharma also noted that “across the world the labour pool isn’t growing fast enough to support our needs”.

Some countries are facing a declining work force and an aging population, requiring an increasing amount of resources and workers to provide elder care. Japan, for example, is turning to robots to solve the problem, particularly in elder-care homes.

In an article published at good.is, [Why Robots Are the Future of Elder Care \(http://www.good.is/articles/robots-elder-care-pepper-exoskeletons-japan\)](#), Mark Hay says that by 2010 Japan already had 30 million elderly and infirm individuals in care facilities, but had nowhere near the amount of caregivers needed to look after them. So they are turning to robots.

The range of technologies being developed by the Japanese includes robots assisting with mobility, monitoring seniors who may have dementia, lifting, bathing and fetching. They are also developing companion robots to reduce loneliness.

In Canada, seniors make up the fastest-growing age group and over the next 20 years nearly a quarter of British Columbia’s population will be older than 65. On the North Shore, we expect the population of seniors to more than double. This will

inevitably put a burden on resources and increase the need for workers in the elder-care sector.

As Kim Pemberton reported [in a Vancouver Sun article last month \(http://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/b-c-home-support-workers-hurt-at-twice-provincial-average\)](http://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/b-c-home-support-workers-hurt-at-twice-provincial-average), the home support sector is growing steadily, with a 34-per-cent increase since 2012. The article also stated that workers in this sector have one of the most dangerous jobs in B.C., with injuries to their backs, shoulders, wrists and hands reportedly being common. Perhaps in the future injuries could be reduced with a friendly robot doing the heavy lifting.

Many of us fear a future where robots take jobs away from people, but Sharma wrote that where robots have been introduced, jobs have also increased. According to his research, the job picture is particularly strong in the industrial countries with the most robots.

For many of us the idea of a robot assisting us at home or in a care home may be too futuristic but robotic care for elders is taken seriously in many other places. Robot technology for older people is being developed, tested and introduced in France, Italy, Germany and Japan.

Hay wrote that robotic technological development in the west is slower than it is in Japan but as development increases and products improve, so will acceptance of robots in facilities dedicated to the treatment of the elderly.

The debate over whether seniors should be driving after a certain age could be stopped if we had self-driving or autonomous vehicles. A self-driving vehicle could ensure seniors stayed independent and more mobile. A robot that helps around the house could ensure that seniors remain longer in their own homes.

As Raye Lee, president of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society, said when she heard about a self-driving car and robot maid, "sign me up for those."

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 47 years and has worked for and with seniors for 20 of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Email: lions_view@telus.net

© 2016 North Shore News

[Sign up for the North Shore News FREE digital newsletter to receive top headlines from each issue in your Inbox. \(http://www.nsnews.com/newsletter/subscribe\)](http://www.nsnews.com/newsletter/subscribe)