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Ireland UPS the Ante on IT for the Elderly

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Ireland's commitment to the elderly is reflected by its Minister for Older People, Ms Máire Hoctor, an ambitious young representative for the Fianna Fáil party from the constituency of Tipperary North. Ireland has more than 1 million people aged over 60, and like the rest of Europe, their share is increasing.

Since her appointment as a Minister last year, Ms. Hoctor has been instrumental in driving elderly issues to the top of Ireland's political agenda.

One promising initiative is CARDI, a new non-profit organisation, developed by leading researchers in the area of ageing. The second is TRIL, the Technology Research for Independent Living Centre at St James's Hospital in Dublin.

The CARDI Centre for Ageing

CARDI (The Centre for Ageing Research in Ireland) was launched in March as an umbrella organisation to ensure the proactive and interdisciplinary coordination of research into specific problems faced by the elderly in Ireland. CARDI is hosted by the Institute of Public Health and supported by Atlantic Philanthropies. During the launch, Ms. Hoctor pointed out an all-too common issue – that "all too often the figures and statistics surrounding older people are used in relation to issues such as care, illness and talk around the 'burden' of an ageing population", rather than their "enormous contribution" in a variety of areas – including "politics, literature, music, amateur drama, voluntary work, community development and family life."

CARDI not only aims to induce more effective collaboration between researchers on ageing but also promote the dissemination of age-related research and introduce into the agenda of policy makers. CARDI also makes clear that such an agenda will be relevant to real-world practices.

TRIL: Technology and Independent Living

CARDI was launched less than a month after the opening by Ms. Hoctor of the TRIL (Technology Research for Independent Living) Centre at St James's Hospital in Dublin, an initiative supported by Ireland's Industrial Development Agency.

Based on a Common Technology Platform (see box), TRIL aims to discover and deploy solutions to support autonomy in the elderly. It combines clinical knowledge with cutting-edge IT to conduct research into the physical, psychological and social consequences of ageing.

Areas already identified by the TRIL Clinic as priorities include investigations into cognitive decline and dementia. TRIL also intends to explore how technology can encourage social interaction among older people who often end up lonely, depressed and isolated.

One explicit goal is to show that connecting people with the community and their friends and families, using the latest IT and communications technologies, can improve their quality of life.

One facet of the TRIL effort is to obtain inputs from caregivers who directly interact with older people in their own environments – so as to provide 'real world' input into the design and implementation of new technologies.

As assessed by a by a Swedish expert in this issue of Healthcare IT Management ('Elderly Health, Homecare And Information Technology'), such an approach is often a missing ingredient in otherwise-ambitious initiatives to find IT solutions targeted at the elderly.

Indeed, TRIL is already considered to be one of the largest such efforts of its kind. Other than St. James' Hospital, other participants include three leading Irish academic centres: Trinity College Dublin, University

College Dublin and the National University of Ireland at Galway, aswell as Intel.

Technology@Tril

In spite of a diversity of research projects, the TRIL Centre is developing a Common Technology Platform directed at the reallife needs of the elderly, now and as they (are perceived to) evolve in the future. The platform consists of software and hardware for devices such as home sensors, - mobile physiological status monitors, communication assistants. It is designed as an open architecture, and will provide the core technologies and operational elements for all activities by the TRIL Centre, allowing researchers to focus on domain issues rather than tackling redundant core

technology for demonstrations and experiments.

The development of the Common Technology Platform is two-phased:

Ó First Phase

This will involve creation of rapid prototypes for TRIL Centre research themes which enhance the delivery of data collection and aggregation systems.

Ó Second Phase

In parallel with the implementation of the first phase rapid prototypes, researchers will gather essential parameters from tests on different themes, so as to create the specifications and requirements for a re-usable open architecture system. This will collect, collate, and correlate user data from a portfolio of building blocks and components, which will in turn serve as the foundation for a common sensor, computing and communications platform.

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