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Author(s)	Barrett, Eva; Murphy, Kathleen; Mannion, Arlene; Meskell, Pauline; Burke, Megan; Casey, Dympna; Whelan, Sally
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CAN SOCIAL ROBOTS HELP TO REDUCE LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA? A DELPHI SURVEY

Eva Barrett[1] , Kathleen Murphy[1] , Arlene Mannion[1] , Pauline Meskell[2] , Megan Burke[1] , Dympna Casey[1] , Sally Whelan[1]

[1] National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland

[2] University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

Background: People with dementia (PWD) commonly report feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Social robots may be a means of supporting connections with friends and family and with the person's environment. This study aimed to establish consensus amongst experts regarding the role of social robots in reducing loneliness and isolation in PWD.

Methods: Experts in dementia and/or robotics were invited to participate in a three round online Delphi survey. Following an extensive literature review thirteen statements were developed and piloted to establish validity and clarity. In Round 1, panellists (n = 31) rated their level of agreement with these statements using a 5-point Likert scale. In Round 2, panellists (n = 24) re-rated their agreement while viewing their score in comparison with the rest of the panel (median and interquartile ranges). Key areas of disagreement which emerged in Round 2 were explored further in Round 3 (n = 17).

Results: There was high consensus agreement that social robots could reduce loneliness and isolation in PWD. Panellists agreed that social robots may be most useful where PWD live at home alone, or in residential care settings to support staff. Key principles when designing a robot include the consideration of a personalised and individualised robot which offers choice to the PWD. For effective implementation, the PWD should be actively engaged throughout the development process and the family/caregivers should be included during early stage implementation. Music and reminiscence interventions were considered feasible and important interventions delivered by a robot.

Conclusion: Experts in the field agreed that social robots may have a role in reducing loneliness and social isolation in PWD. However, the robot should be developed to interact with each person at an individualised level. Future research should examine the level of consensus amongst PWD with regard to the role they feel social robots may have in their lives.