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Tech, Alcohol And Ageism On The Minds Of Top Aging Experts



Next Avenue

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Next Avenue, Contributor

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Late last month, more than 6,000 professionals in gerontology and geriatrics convened in San Francisco for the IAGG World Congress, an event that occurs every four years and brings together representatives from disciplines such as medicine, nursing and social science, to address the latest ideas to improve the quality of life for older adults. (IAGG stands for International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics.) I was there representing the [Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging](#), and was exposed to the latest science, research, training, technology and policy



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The conference theme, “Global Aging and Health: Bridging Science, Policy, and Practice,” was especially relevant given the Milken Center’s focus to create a better future for the current generation of older adults and for generations to come.

Highlighted in this review are a few of the hottest trends in technology, health, culture and innovation discussed at the conference; they help make the case for investment in longevity.

Self-Care Technology

Self-care technology (that's technology employed by patients) was among one of the big technology trends at the conference. Representatives from corporations such as Pfizer, Walmart and Samsung discussed health care trends and issues in the aging and self-care space; the audience expanded

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Panel presentations showed how technology is supporting the aging population and addressed the impact of tech on health care. For instance, as [Next Avenue has written](#), patients can now use virtual reality for physical exercise and pain treatment, a clinical outcome resulting from [telemedicine](#) interventions.

“It's not about technology for technology's sake,” said Dr. Wen Dombrowski, chief convergence officer of [Catalaize](#), a consultancy that advises on innovation and emerging technologies to meet patients' and families' real needs. “Self-care technology for the aging population should be driven by older adults.”

In short, it is about the need to invest in self-care tech, even if that requires leveraging existing technologies and innovation solutions (such as Alexa or Siri) to support healthy aging. As W. Reid Estreicher, senior care business development lead at U.S. Samsung, said: “Technology has amazing

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Older adults want to be empowered to seek self-care solutions — including emerging [technologies](#) — to improve their health and wellness. These innovations were discussed in a unique, one-day technology and aging track, featuring a startup alley and pitch competition.

Alcohol Use in Older Adults

Alcohol consumption was a key health subject at the conference. While alcohol use is a niche trend in aging research, it poses a serious health risk. Research shows widespread alcohol-related problems among older adults.

“Alcohol consumption is the third-leading cause of morbidity and the primary cause in 4% of deaths worldwide,” said Andy Towers, senior lecturer at Massey University's School of Public Health, in a session titled “Cross-National Exploration of Older Adults’ Alcohol Use.”

These are staggering statistics. Martin Hyde, associate professor of gerontology at

issue.” Therefore, the speakers said, fast action is needed on the policy and societal fronts. For instance, experts can better [educate](#) policymakers and the public about the effects of alcohol consumption.

A Positive View of Aging

A recurring theme during the conference was how to view aging in a positive light, impacting various sectors in culture and society. “Challenging negative stereotypes around growing older starts with us,” said Jo Ann Jenkins, CEO of AARP, in her keynote address about disrupting aging.

Jenkins urged everyone to become change agents and everyday innovators on aging, starting with accepting their own age. This is a challenge and opportunity for all, because, as Jenkins asked, “Despite the opportunities in aging, why is aging still viewed as a problem in societies?”

The Power of Older Workers

Dr. Linda Fried, dean of the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, spoke about the assets of an aging population for stronger societies. “Paid work for older adults fuels the economy and more work for the young,” she said.

This mirrors the message in a [report](#) published by the Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging, “The Power of Purposeful Aging: Culture Change and the New Demography.” The report found that people over 50 in the United States are

Taking Charge of Our Health

As companies find ways to serve the older population, speakers noted, it is important to remember that innovations can empower people to manage their [health](#) as they grow older.

In a session titled, “Nutritional and Skin Health Solutions for Independence, Functional Ability and Wellness as We Age,” Valerio Nannini, senior vice president, strategies and performance, at Nestle, explained that personalized digital nutrition is poised to disrupt aging. It explores how people use digital tools to help deliver the ideal nutrition at the right cost.

Aside from digital trackers and connected sensors, Nestle is also working on skin health innovations. Studies show that a simple skin care regimen can significantly improve quality of life and reduce itching and infection.

Tackling Ageism and Changing the Culture

As I think back on the conference, I recall a question that Laura Carstensen, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, posed to the audience during the “Facilitating Purpose in Later Life” session. She asked: “Why are we not creating a culture that supports long life?”

Since ageism is the root cause, societies need to tackle ageism on all fronts to improve the lives of current and future generations. Older

A Personal Note

My journey in this exciting field began when I registered for a course titled Psychology of Aging as an undergraduate student in bioinformatics. My quest for creating this age-friendly culture now continues at the Center for the Future of Aging as we work to change the perception of older adults in policy, business, media and other domains through research, convening, informing and educating.

This year's conference had a packed agenda that emphasized aging as a lifelong process – from conception through old age. I look forward to attending the 2021 conference in Buenos Aires.

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