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Imagining what life will be like in the next 50 years

By Chan Heng Chee, For The Straits Times

IF I am still alive in 50 years, I will have the prospect of living to be 150 or more. This is not a fanciful statement.

Already, the number of centenarians are increasing in many countries. According to United Nations estimates, there are 316,000 centenarians in the world today.

Dr Aubrey de Grey, the chief science officer at the California-based Sens Foundation, which studies the social implications of scientific rejuvenation research, suggests that there is a possibility that people may live up to 1,000 years with the new medical and technology innovations.

If that is the case, people in rich countries will live longer; people in poor countries will not have the same advantages.

Of course there is a debate about whether Dr de Grey has made a compelling case. But the fact remains that people do seem to be living longer.

How will people live their lives when they are a healthy 100, 109 or 120? Will they think of age differently?

What will cities and countries look like with a large greying population? What activities, designs and technologies will be needed?

According to a government report released in January 2012, 40 per cent of the Japanese population will be 65 or older in 2060. In 50 years, Japan will have one million people over the age of 100. And in China, a UN estimate in 2010 suggested that the proportion of elderly (over 65) in 2050 will be 30 per cent. This will also happen in Korea, and in Singapore too.

What would a suitable retirement age be in 50 years? We must assume people will be healthier, younger-looking and more energetic in their old age.

One advantage of living longer is that society may become better at long-term planning. With a greater proportion of the population expecting to be around to see and feel the effects, environment and climate change issues will be taken more seriously.

Rapid urbanisation also means that most people will live in cities. According to the World Health Organisation, in 2050 nearly three quarters of the world will be urbanised.

Indeed, the urban population will grow to 7 billion or even 9 billion compared to the 3.6 billion now. Most of us will be living in a smart city. It will be a city where there will be an urban information explosion.

Already, information technology has spread beyond the desktop, into our iPhones and tablets. In future, sensors will be embedded in infrastructure, buildings, cars, and personal devices such as watches, spectacles and clothes. Some may even be embedded in ourselves.

City driving may be controlled by an iPhone sensor, or sensors on our body. Indeed, cellphones and computers may not even be needed. Our watches could be our computers. Google has come up with eye glasses that have a computer embedded in them.

People will be able to monitor their health and fitness and gather all kinds of medical data. Yes, 50

years hence, intelligent devices will be embedded everywhere.

How our attitudes to intelligence have changed.

Previously, many people thought of intelligence gathering in terms of Nineteen Eighty-Four, the novel by George Orwell. In that book, technology was seen as part of a totalitarian vision. Now, information gathering is regarded as something positive.

Information technology can - and already does in some cities - help a city or country monitor its urban infrastructure, such as water leaks and building structural risks, better.

It could also be used to optimise delivery routes and public transport routes, reducing costs and commuting time for businesses and individuals alike. It may also predict a breakout of a pandemic, or help track and contain it.

Do we have too much data? Do we know how to handle it?

Many people already find themselves compulsively checking their e-mails and news flashes every few minutes.

Imagine how nerve-racking it would be if sensors in buildings, infrastructure, and other locations kept sending us information.

But there is an even more serious downside to this data explosion. If data is not properly managed, it can be abused.

Presumably, with this vast intelligence, we can use analytics to discriminate against people. For example, it would be possible to know a lot more about the people being interviewed for jobs or university applications.

And in choosing a partner or spouse, it would be possible to make a decision about developing the relationship based on such information rather than good old- fashioned personal chemistry.

Our notions of privacy are increasingly being challenged. And our tolerance for the loss of privacy is changing. In 50 years, will the demand for privacy be seen as quaint? Our personal lives will certainly be different.

In a device-driven, app-driven and intelligence-driven society, will society's perception of time change? People already expect results at the press of a key. That's very fast. Will people become even more impatient?

I am inclined to believe that humanity will be less sociable. Today, rather than walk to the next room to talk to a colleague, people send e-mails.

Perhaps in future, people will interact only with those they want to instead of those they have to. Imagine that you never need to ask for directions because you can touch a screen and get the answer.

In the future people may have the ability to go through life largely on their own. But it will be important to preserve the sense of humanity and community along with the technology.

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