



## What do Daleks have to do with care and support?

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It isn't often in my role that I get to think about robots. When I do, they're more likely to be something outlandish from Dr Who. But thanks to the University of the West of England's (UWE) Engineering Department and The Anchor Society, thinking about robots is exactly what I spent an inspiring afternoon doing at the Bristol Robotics Lab.

In the space of a few hours, I shifted from thinking of robots as Dalek-like, clunky machines to the synapse-sparkling revelation that there are already life-friendly robots that could become as much part of our lives as the iPhone or the internet.

So, what is a real robot? Don't think of something from the likes of Toy Story or from the dark side of the scientist's mind. According to Chris Mill-Hewish, Chair of Bristol Robotics, a robot is a three dimensional thing, living in real space, with a degree of autonomy born of artificial intelligence that can carry out interactions which can support and help aspects of our lives.

Socially-motivated engineers like Chris and his amazing team of students and academics have developed open source robots and competitions to sponsor further development so that learning can be shared and the pace of development increased.

The implications for health, care and support are real. There are robots being developed right now that could help you get dressed if that ever became difficult for you; deliver cancer-busting drugs in personally tailored Nano doses straight into the core of hard-to-reach tumours; or simply make you a sandwich and plan your diary and transport.

Some of this technology is with us already. There's a robot on the market right now, aimed at people with memory problems, that can remind you to take your medication, to eat and will offer prompts that can help people with dementia to structure their day. These robots can put the kettle on, enable you to hang out with your children in Australia through the internet, and help you regain mobility and speech following a stroke.

Can robots ever replace people? Of course not – but there are tasks like toileting, getting dressed and simply getting up from a seated position that could enhance our dignity day-to-day by offering privacy and practical help.

Just one of the thought-provoking questions raised by UWE's Dr Caleb-Solly in her tantalizing glimpse of all our futures, was whether our obsession with sci-fi imagery

presented a barrier to our full engagement with robots. We have been conditioned to think of them as dangerous. Well, I did – until now.

With an ageing population, robotics has within its gift the ability to complement the irreplaceable support and human contact that only people can give. Robotics can offer practical help with physical tasks but also socially interactive support that aids dignity and promotes independence for people who want it. My glimpse into the future gave me insight into positive artificial intelligence machines that can transform people's lives, delivering dignity and independence for old and disabled people.

I was left with a couple of important questions. How can we ensure that the right collaboration is in place across housing, social care and robotics to ensure we focus the brightest minds on solving the very real challenges of an aging population? How do we get robots to become as affordable and desirable as an everyday smart-phone?

Perhaps the key question is this: how is our friendly robot going to manage the stairs? Dalek in a stair lift? Problem solved.

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