

Robotic healthcare pods for Singapore housing? New ideas floated by leading government thinker.

Nurfilzah Rohaidi

GovInsider, 20 April 2017

SINGAPORE could see healthcare diagnosis pods and robotic nurses serving in public housing, Peter Ho, Chairman of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, said yesterday.

In a public lecture inviting the audience to “imagine” the future of the Smart Nation initiative, Ho said that Singapore could see “robotic helpers do the household chores and prepare meals: they order groceries when food items are low in stock, which are then delivered by drone to the doorstep.”

He added that: “Throughout Singapore there [could be] healthcare pods deployed islandwide at every housing block. These provide medical diagnosis, dispense medications and provide simple medical services as well. These make it more convenient for elderly residents who have mobility issues and for those who do not have the time to visit the clinic.”

However, Ho warned that the “government may not be structured to reach this level of imagination and boldness of vision”.

“Some might argue that it is not even [government’s] business,” he added. The private sector could better potentially achieve innovation at this level; by individual startups that possess “the daring and the ideas”.

Ho’s lecture argued that officials must be resilient in the face of increasing complexity, and prepared to innovate and fail.

“Governments can play safe and watch from the sidelines, but then they will be overtaken by those who are nimbler and more daring. Or, they can get some skin in the game now, through research test bedding and pilots,” Ho said.

He noted that Singapore’s Ministry of Defence was unable to upgrade purely by investing more in new equipment. It needed a mindset change and new ways of operating.

The agency set up the Future Systems and Technology Directory “with a mandate to think about the longer term challenges facing the Singapore Armed Forces and come up with new operational concepts,” he said.

This innovation unit generated “frictions and tensions in the system by the very nature of its mission” and made some feel “uncomfortable”, but it was “a catalyst for innovation”.

Ho said that Singapore had considered establishing a central innovation unit to trial new ideas across departments, but that this approach would not work. “My conclusion was, we couldn’t do it. It’s just too complex to manage it,” Ho remarked.

More broadly, Ho warned that Singapore faces a more complex and volatile world. It is vital, he noted, that the political leadership retains citizens' trust.

"The onus must be on political leadership to convince people that [their] fears are misplaced, at least in Singapore", according to Ho. "This can only be achieved when there's trust between the people and the government," he said.