CAMBRIDGE, Mass. - The aging of the baby boomer generation will spur technological innovation and change the entire health-care system, age researcher Joseph Coughlin said Friday, speaking at a panel discussion on health care and technology sponsored by the New England Business and Technology Association.

But that innovation will not come from within the existing health-care industry and institutions. "Those who are going to change the system are those who say, 'Why can't we provide service from the drug store or even the grocery store? Why do we have to go to the doctor's office?,'" said Coughlin, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Age lab said.

The oldest baby boomers will celebrate their 65th birthdays in 2011. In 2030, 26 percent of the U.S. population will be aged 65 or older, compared with 17 percent today, according to government projections. Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964.

The large wave of those approaching retirement age is sometimes referred to as the "geezer boom," which Coughlin, himself a baby boomer, finds somewhat misleading. "We will not be like our parents or grandparents. If we are tired or suffer from a little bit of pain, that's not what we're going to accept as a natural part of aging. We're going to have a higher set of expectations. And the expectations are going to be driven by our aspirations and our money to be able to go after what we want."

The numbers of economically wealthy older people will provide business opportunities, Coughlin said. "Health care, grocery stores, pharmacies -- they all have to pay more attention to the aging population more than they've ever done before. Companies that have never been into health care will move into the health, wellness and vitality industry."

Companies worldwide will look at the largest demographic in modern history and ask what they want, Coughlin said. Various retailers, including discount store chains, already sell health and wellness devices. However, focusing on devices isn't enough. Coughlin expects to see health-related businesses that have multidisciplinary teams comprised of a range of expertise, including marketing, behavioral knowledge and health care.

"The consumers are a lot smarter now, saying, 'OK, yes, I can monitor my blood pressure, I can do glucose, but what does it mean? Is that level good or is that bad?' The health-care consumer will also ask, 'What do I do about it, and do you have a service in place that can actually take action? And give me information back, not just the numbers','" he said.

Shared access to digitally stored medical records will be necessary to help people pick and choose from the future smorgasbord of health-care services. "Consumers are going to want to have a consultation with their pharmacist, with their specialist, with a
nutritionist, and exercise with a physiologist. They need to share the information about the patient."

In the U.S. today, shared access to medical records is restrained for competitive reasons and privacy issues. However, people routinely sacrifice privacy for convenience.

"People give up privacy every day when they use an ATM card or a credit card and they don't think twice about it," Coughlin said.

"The reason is they are getting something in return. They get better service, they get convenience, they get information and they maintain a sense of control. ... Once I have convenience, control and value ... I'm willing to transact my privacy the way I do everyday with my American Express [card]."

Coughlin’s predictions of consumer-driven innovation were supported by panelist Eric Handler, chief medical officer in the Boston regional office of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "Over the next five years, public reporting of information on hospitals’ physicians, on quality, is going to allow the consumer to pick and choose," he said. "For example: You'll be able to lock up which hospital has the best surgical quality in regards to breast cancer. Now the consumer will have the necessary information to be the discriminate buyer," Handler said.