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### WORK & FAMILY

By SUE SHELLNBARGER

#### Remote Control: Frail Seniors Embrace Home Monitoring

When John Fowlkes's adult daughter suggested installing an electronic monitoring system in his apartment to oversee his well-being from afar, "I was very skeptical," he says. To Mr. Fowlkes, 86, who has an active social life including an 80-year-old girlfriend, the idea evoked thoughts of Big Brother.

Mindful that a younger friend had fallen at home and lain on the floor for hours before anyone came to help, Mr. Fowlkes, of Raleigh, N.C., gave in. To his surprise, he found the setup "makes you feel more secure."

Overseeing the aged from afar is a hot issue for working caregivers, and the technology needed to do so is available. But policy makers and others have long fretted that seniors would resist electronic monitoring as an invasion of privacy.

Now, Big Brother has arrived -- and seniors are rolling out the welcome mat. As vendors make in-home monitoring systems widely available, seniors are mounting little resistance, and many are embracing the gadgetry as an aid to remaining independent.

Home-monitoring customers total a few thousand nationwide, according to half a dozen monitoring companies I surveyed. The most common systems use wireless motion or contact sensors on doorways, windows, walls, ceilings, cabinets, refrigerators, appliances or beds to track seniors' movements. Temperature sensors gauge heat and air conditioning. If an elderly person enters the bathroom and doesn't come out, or other typical activity patterns aren't recorded in the home, word can be sent to family members, 24-hour response workers or both. The systems also offer hand-held or wearable "panic buttons."

The QuietCare system used by Mr. Fowlkes is monitored by response workers. His daughter, Alisa Washington, who lives nearby, receives email updates several times a day at work. She says it gives her "much greater peace of mind."

Seniors draw the line at some kinds of surveillance. Many protest against the presence of video cameras, says Majd Alwan, who conducted several small studies of monitoring systems as a professor at the University of Virginia. They see motion and contact sensors as less invasive, says Dr. Alwan, now director of the Center for Aging Services Technologies, Washington, D.C., a nonprofit research group.

Also, most seniors need time to get used to the idea. When 94-year-old Christine Martin's son Marty suggested monitoring her in her Sarasota, Fla., home, she objected at first, saying "she didn't want anything spying on her," says Mr. Martin, Buford, Ga.

Nevertheless, if technology helps delay the time when a senior must be admitted to a nursing home, Dr. Alwan's research found, a large majority of seniors are willing to accept it. Ms. Martin cherishes her independence; she also remembers a sad mishap involving her late sister, who died at home but wasn't found until two days later. Soon, she agreed to monitoring, and found she likes it. Knowing Marty "can tell when I'm getting up in the morning," Ms. Martin says, "I feel safer."

## TALKING POINTS

To raise the subject of home monitoring with seniors:

- **Explain** how the technology will help
- **Involve them** in decision making
- **Give them** a chance to get used to the idea
- **Present it** as an aid to remaining independent

Source: Wendy Rogers, Georgia Institute of Technology

Among a total of about 80 seniors in Dr. Alwan's studies, only one mounted any lasting resistance to being monitored; after the research was complete, many protested when the systems were removed from their homes, Dr. Alwan says. The setups also reduced caregiver strain without reducing the time family members spent with elders.

Costs of various systems range from \$99 to several thousand dollars to install, plus about \$35 to \$150 a month. Systems range from simple sensors to video cameras and teleconferencing or even a dedicated WebTV channel to post family news (offered by GrandCare Systems, West Bend, Wis.). The QuietCare system is sold by Living Independently, New York. Other vendors include Alarm.com, McLean, Va.; Caregiver Technologies, Oklahoma City; and Community Management Initiative, Green Bay, Wis.

Also, a growing number of assisted-living facilities are installing monitoring systems to help staff oversee residents, and some allow families remote access to the data gathered.

More elaborate technology is in the works. Researchers at Oregon Health & Science University, Portland, are working on home systems that track changes in seniors' physical and cognitive abilities over time, lining up wall sensors to track seniors' walking speed and computer kiosks to engage them regularly in cognitive tests and games. Such long-term data could provide early warning of such conditions as dementia, says Tamara Hayes, an assistant professor, biomedical engineering.