

Technical help for seniors

Many of us may already be facing the problems of the sandwich generation: children still dependent and living at home; part-time or even full-time work; parents, relatives or friends who are increasingly elderly, maybe frail and living at a distance. This worrying situation can be helped by new technology.

While it is now quite common to see fitness-aware people with trackers that alert them to their number of steps taken, blood pressure and caloric intake on a daily basis, means to keep an electronic eye on elderly parents are also being developed.

Tempo by CarePredic is "a wristband tracker that doubles as a watch and logs the daily activities of its users...by looking to identify early warning signs of health issues that usually begin as changes in normal behaviour patterns". While it is still in the early stages (selling for US\$169), it is designed to alert carers to changes in the wearer's normal behaviour, while taking regular activities into account such as cooking, eating and even tooth-brushing. The wristband works by sensors that track the user's movements throughout the home. This may at first appear to be an invasion of privacy, but it will alert caregivers, via their computer or mobile, to check up on the physical and even mental health of a parent if the watch is not put on or if there is a change in regular activities, such as the wearer returning to bed at an odd hour or if there are deviations from regular eating patterns. This looks like a great idea as it can help when the wearer isn't even conscious that anything, such as depression, may be of concern.

Right now there are personal emergency response services (two of which are readily available and Australian: VitalCall and FirstCall) which involve a pendant, normally hung around the wearer's neck, which is waterproof so can be worn in showers and baths. Their difference from the wristband tracker is that the wearer must be alert to the fact that something is going wrong, such as falling and unable to get up or feeling very ill, and they must be able to press the button on the pendant, not always easy if they have suffered a stroke. Both these services have a base connected to the home phone and, when the button is pressed, a message is sent to an operator who contacts whoever has been registered - a family member, neighbour, friend or emergency service.

VitalCall may be available free of charge to eligible veterans through the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Otherwise there is an installation charge (from \$138.50) and a rental/monitoring fee (from \$33.10 per month), but a free in-home demonstration can be arranged: call 1300 360 808. However FirstCall, if it is fully pre-programmed to call the owner's family or friends, is just \$315 with no extra charges; there is a small monthly fee if calling the family is not appropriate, perhaps for reasons of distance, but there is then a 24-hour medical alarm monitoring service. FirstCall can be contacted on 1300 408 080. The value of any of these devices is that parents can stay in their own homes, and both parents and children can feel comforted by the security of knowing that there is 24 hour assistance available 365 days a year.

Lee Sharam

on behalf of the KV Seniors Accommodation & Support Committee