

Caregiver's Corner Column (April 2013)

New Technology That Impacts Caregivers

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SafeCall

"Lassie, go get help" yelled Timmy as he found himself in yet another predicament. If you are of a certain age, you will remember this well-worn situation from the TV series "Lassie". Yelling for help might work sometimes; it seems quaint in today's cellular-Wi-Fi-smartphone-Bluetooth-LTE-crazy world.

I would like to introduce you to the modern-day Lassies: home safety systems that use phone and the Internet to keep elders and the disabled safe at home.

Most people know about the basic home safety tool - an emergency help button or PERS (Personal Emergency Response Service); you wear a lightweight button around the house, push it if you need help and talk to operators who answer your call. The buttons are waterproof. You can signal for help outside the home. A PERS can even help you to answer a ringing phone. These systems can detect falls, smoke and carbon monoxide, watch for a lack-of-motion in your home and can call for assistance if you have problems taking your medication. This humble help button does more than just call for help. *Sorry Lassie but your services are no longer needed.* PERS services are \$30-\$40/month with an installation charge. **Consumer tip: Avoid companies that require you to purchase PERS equipment. Most companies will rent you the equipment and monitoring services together for \$30-\$40/month.**

Automated medication dispensers are very helpful to family caregivers who often struggle to manage their loved ones' medications. These devices secure an elder's meds for one or two weeks at a time. They alarm audibly and visually. Most companies can use their PERS device to supervise a medication dispenser; call center operators are alerted to a late dose and contact the home or caregivers in order to keep the elders' meds current. Medication dispensers usually rent for \$35-\$99/month and will also have an installation charge.

PERS and medication dispenser providers in West Michigan include SafeCall (www.safecall.biz), Elders' Helpers (www.eldershelpers.com), Life Connections (www.gerontologynetwork.org) and Philips Lifeline (www.philips.lifelinesystems.com).

There are companies that have services that combine PERS, medication reminders and an array of small sensors to detect lack-of-motion and temperature fluctuations in the home and even collect a person's vital sign data (heart rate, pulse, body weight, blood glucose). Research has shown vital sign monitoring to be a great help in managing chronic medical conditions. Internet connections are often needed but not always. These systems may require an equipment purchase and monthly monitoring charges or have only a monitoring charge.

Some providers of these services are: Grand Care (www.grandcare.com) and Healthsense (www.healthsense.com). These systems have an equipment purchase cost ranging from \$2,000-\$8,000. Monthly monitoring is another \$60-\$75.

Although smartphones have become popular, the rate of acceptance among those over age 65 is under 12%. That hasn't stopped the development of safety apps for smartphones. These apps can call for help, remind you to take medications, track your daily activity, provide you with intellectually stimulating activities and the list keeps growing.

A beginning list of apps for caregivers to consider is Guardly (www.guardly.com), vSOS (www.vsos.com) and Plerts (www.plerts.com). These smartphone apps are available at the Android and iPhone App stores. The apps are free but there is a fee for subscribing to the service.

Some companies add services to their own phone, like Jitterbug (www.greatcall.com). Jitterbug has been around for over ten years now and has several enhanced models of its basic phone. The phone is around \$99 to purchase. Minutes are purchased separately.

Safety products and services for seniors are racing to the marketplace faster than Lassie can cross that raging river to Timmy's side. My article should help you select some basic services. The Lassie app is only available on TV.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.