

No place like home

FOR ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS WHO TEND TO WANDER SAFELY HOME IS A LIFELINE

by ELLEN ASHTON-HAISTE

Being lost is a scary situation. And it's one faced on an all-too-frequent basis by victims of Alzheimer's disease.

The tendency to wander is a common symptom of the degenerative brain disease that eventually steals much of a person's memory and their ability to make judgments and even to care for themselves. When they wander away from home, with no memory of once-familiar landmarks and streets, it's easy for them to become lost.

They need a guardian angel to guide them home and those who work with Safely Home, a nationwide program of the Alzheimer Society of Canada, provide just that service. Developed in partnership with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police the wandering registry is a database of confidential information on registrants who suffer from Alzheimer's. It can be accessed by police anywhere in Canada and the United States. With this information, officers are often able to locate missing persons and return them to their families.

This fall, the nine-year-old program, got a shot in the arm thanks to a two-year grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, to the tune of \$384,000. The funding is allowing the society to update its educational resources and guidelines and to create a training video for police.

Although the grant is provided by an

Ontario agency and the work is being done here, results will be shared with association branches across the country, benefiting a host of Canadians suffering with Alzheimer's, says acting media relations manager Audrey Vince.

The country's largest province also has the bulk of the country's Alzheimer's victims and of the 14,000 Canadian Safety Home registrants, 8,800 are in Ontario, 2,680 of those in Metro Toronto alone. The number of Toronto registrants is larger than in the entire province of Quebec (2,158) which is second in numbers to Ontario.

Registration in the program is voluntary but can give family members and caregivers added peace of mind. For a one-time fee of \$25, the patients' information, including personal history, physical characteristics and locations where they are known to visit, is plugged into the database and they receive identification bracelets and cards. The files are then updated annually.

When a person is missing, the caregiver calls the local police who begin the search. Similarly, when a person is found wandering, the officer can check the identification bracelet against the database to help the person return home.

Wandering, in itself, is not a harmful behaviour and may even be a healthy outlet or a coping mechanism for a person with this

disease, as long as it's done in a safe environment. In fact, some residential facilities with special wards for Alzheimer's patients have created enclosed outdoor areas with circular paths where the patients can walk with no danger of wandering off the property and becoming lost.

For those living at home, there are ways for caregivers to manage the behaviour. Doors to the outside may be decorated to disguise their purpose and fenced in backyards provide a safe place to be outdoors. Identifying triggers that promote wandering behaviour and removing them can also be useful.

Caregivers are advised to keep a diary of the wandering to help in identifying triggers and patterns.

And, in case a patient does wander away and get lost, an up-to-date photo should always be kept on hand to assist police.



Steve Rudin, executive director, Alzheimer Society of Canada observes Toronto Police Constable Trevor Rooney access Safely Home, the Society's wandering registry, from the police computer. Police officers across Canada use Safely Home to help find a person with Alzheimer Disease who is lost and assist in a safe return home.

PHOTO courtesy of the Alzheimer Society of Canada

For more information about the Safely Home registry or about Alzheimer's disease and its various symptoms, call the society in Toronto at 416-488-8772 or 800-616-8816 or check its website at alzheimer.ca.



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Sunrise is pleased to offer a fall series of educational seminars for those caring for someone with memory impairment or Alzheimer disease. Topics include:

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BEAT BACK THE BUGS

Now that the frost has hit the pumpkin, the worst of the summer invaders - mosquitoes, ladybugs, Junebugs and other creepy-crawlers - have disappeared. But be prepared for another type of pest that's about to make an appearance. It's the season of the flu bug.

This bug can, however, be kept at bay. Doctors across the province are advising their patients to make appointments for their annual flu vaccinations. Ontario is the only jurisdiction in North America to make the influenza vaccine available free to all residents.

Doctors maintain that flu shots benefit everyone, but say it's particularly important for people at risk of complications and those close to them who may spread the disease.

These include:

- Anyone aged 65 or older
- people with chronic heart or lung disease
- people with diabetes or other metabolic disease, cancer, kidney disease, blood disorders or anyone whose immune system is weakened
- anyone who lives, works or volunteers in a nursing home, chronic care facility or retirement home
- healthcare workers and emergency service workers
- anyone who volunteers in a hospital or other healthcare setting.

Children need to be vaccinated since the flu virus spreads quickly and easily through schools and playgrounds, where youngsters are coughing and sneezing and sharing toys.

Facts parents should know about flu vaccinations include:

- children six months of age or older can be vaccinated
- children under nine years being vaccinated for the first time need two shots, the second shot at least one month after the first
- infection rates are higher in children than in adults

According to Ministry of Health statistics, a flu shot is 70 to 90 per-cent effective in preventing illness in healthy adults and 62 to 73 per cent effective in preventing illness with fever in children. Among the elderly, the vaccine can prevent pneumonia and hospitalization in approximately six out of 10 people.

Protection from the vaccine develops one to two weeks after the shot, and may last up to a year. Effectiveness varies from person to person, depending on general health. Some individuals who get a shot can still get the flu, but if they do, it's usually a milder case than it would have been otherwise.

The flu vaccine changes from year to year to reflect the new strains of the virus that are continually emerging. So last year's shot will be of no protection in the new flu season.

For more information on Ontario's flu campaign, call 416-327-0427 or 866-FLU-'N YOU (866-358-6968).