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High-tech equipment puts eyes in homes of the elderly

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A pilot project using technology to help seniors maintain independence in their own homes for longer than they'd normally be able to is drawing to a close.

There were 42 homes included in the study in Medicine Hat and one of the families using the special equipment shared with the News the difference it has made in their lives.

Several items were installed last September in the home of Emma Edvardson, 91, and her husband Leonard, 90, who have been married for 70 years. There is a bed sensor that is triggered if Emma gets out of bed and when she returns to bed. There are sensors on all the doors to the exterior of the home to raise an alert if they go outside.

Two inconspicuous and strategically-placed cameras, one in the bedroom and another in the livingroom, provide images of the pillow area on the bed and the couple's favourite chairs in front of the television. It ensures they still have a measure of privacy and only their daughter, Evelyn Fried, has access to the images of them in those places.

The technology call/monitoring centre can only see alerts and can check to ensure equipment is sending signals, they cannot access images from any cameras installed in homes, explained a spokesperson for Alberta Health Services. Images are only accessible by the designated caregiver (typically family) through a secure website that is password protected.

Baby monitors are not considered an invasion of privacy and in the cycle of life as seniors live longer, they often return to an infant state, says Fried. There is no more invasion of privacy as a result of the cameras than someone in a long-term care facility would have being monitored by nursing staff. She'd like to see cameras installed in long-term care facilities too. It's something Elder Advocate of Alberta Society has been lobbying for.

Fried's husband, Bert, had a stroke and then fractured a hip resulted in him being placed in a long-term care facility. She says it was regular practice to check on residents around 3 a.m. One morning soon after that check Bert got out of bed and fell. He was not able to call for help and lay there for several hours before staff realized what had happened. Fried says with limited staff on night duty cameras would be an ideal way to visually monitor that residents are still in bed.

"If this technology that my parents have now had been available for Bert, I would have been able to have him at home for so much longer," said Fried.

She recognizes the benefits of seniors mingling with others in a seniors residence, which provides a degree of mental stimulation, but she feels by the time someone requires long-term care they are generally dependent on staff to move them to a communal area. For some the only human interaction they have is with the caregiver.

Because Emma and Leonard have different care needs at the moment they would not be together if they were moved into a seniors' residence. Fried says the technology her parents have in their home has enabled them to continue to living together in their own home.

"We've got it perfect," Leonard said enthusiastically to the News.

The Edvardson's have a full-time caregiver but when the caregiver has days off Fried, who lives nearby, monitors their needs from her cell phone.

This is the first part of a two part story. See Medicine Hat News on Saturday for the second part.