

TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND THE ELDERLY

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My paper today is in two parts, the requirements and social benefits of the Telecare Service and the latter part being a factual case study of a typical system in the Southwest part of England.

A fundamental requirement of any care for the elderly is the provision of a telecommunication network which enables organisations responsible for care and support to contact people; and enable those in the community to contact those with responsibility to care for them. Such a communication network may be used for routine operations of the support agencies and for emergency needs.

A network already exists today in the UK which offers support, reassurance, and emergency help to over 600,000 elderly and disabled people. Over the past 25 years, Tunstall Telecom has steadily developed this communications network in conjunction with local authorities, housing associations and private sector organisations involved in the care of the elderly people.

The heart of the network is a 24 hour manned telecommunications centre (Telecare) usually run by a local authority housing department or Social Services. There are approximately 280 such communication centres operating in the U.K. They are monitoring and helping the 600,000 elderly or disabled people who are living either in sheltered housing or increasingly in the community. Each elderly person has easy access to routine support through a purpose designed alarm telephone unit which is situated in their dwelling.

These home communication units called "LIFELINE" will call the "TELECARE CENTRE" automatically and give a two way speech facility. The "TELECARE" centre has the ability to store information about elderly or disabled persons, to support any request for help. This type of information can be used either for routine administration and support or in the emergency situation.

Many UK local authorities make extensive use of the flexibility of the database provided to undertake administrative support facilities for meals on wheels, home support nursing, or other such activities.

All the lifeline unit can be integrated with other forms of protection such as smoke detection, intruder alarms, environmental and other monitoring equipment.

This "TELECARE" network which has trained and dedicated personnel at all levels will show significant benefits in the provision of elderly care both in terms of finance and quality of life.

The following case study is a factual account of the events resulting to the storms in the Southwest of England on 25th January 1990. On 25th January, severe storms affected the Southwest and the South coast of England. During a 24 hour period from the 25-26 January there were 632 calls from lifeline type units received by the Communications Centre in this area. Many of the calls were from elderly people ensuring that the lifeline system was still in operation if they did need help.

Due to the severity of the storm, main power was severely disrupted throughout the Southwest coast. During the period there were 558 calls from lifeline units operating on emergency batteries. When the calls were received the control centre was able to tell that the lifelines were not operating on the mains, and therefore the persons calling had no electricity - emergency services could then be informed. Most calls were made for reassurance that assistance was available if necessary. Their calls were received due to the established line with the control centre and two way communications with the operators at the centre. The reassurance of the communication line avoided the possibility of panic amongst the elderly who were anxious that flooding or fires due to the mains failure may occur.

The communications network proved that it was capable of functioning under extreme circumstances and was able to provide a vital service for the care and protection of the elderly and disabled.