



JULIE CARL

Brush with death angers family

Margaret Wilkinson quietly marked her 94th birthday last month with fish and chips at a favourite restaurant.

The meal was a happy family occasion that almost didn't happen.

Last March, Wilkinson nearly died of a heart attack — would have died, say family members, if they hadn't been there when her medical emergency call system failed.

Jean Thomas, Wilkinson's daughter with whom she shares a duplex, heard her mother collapse. She raced to Wilkinson's side and pushed the call button on her emergency bracelet again and again. Nothing happened.

She grabbed the phone. It was making weird noises and the call wouldn't go through.

Leaving her mother slumped on the floor, she ran back to her own side of the house to call an ambulance.

The faulty system delayed medical help by at least 15 minutes.

Wilkinson was in hospital 18 days. Her family was very scared — and angry. Very angry.

Neither was pleased with the man's pushy manner, but eventually he talked Wilkinson into buying an \$849 system.

Granddaughter Susan Paddick started demanding answers.

She wasn't happy with the way her grandmother was sold the system. A salesperson just showed up at the door one Sunday afternoon in May 1998. Thomas happened to be visiting.

Neither was pleased with the man's pushy manner, but eventually he talked Wilkinson into buying an \$849 system. He didn't even catch that Wilkinson had a party line, a no-no with an emergency system.

After the heart attack, a company rep determined her unit had a defective dialer. Paddick later learned the units were refurbished. The rep offered to replace it with another refurbished one, but wouldn't refund the money. The company president said Wilkinson was at fault because she hadn't tested the unit monthly, something she says the salesperson didn't tell her.

Paddick's lengthy list of phone calls — from family doctor to MPPs to Better Business Bureau to the police — eventually led her to Parkwood Hospital.

There, she found Evelyn Smith who'd heard similar stories before.

Smith is the co-ordinator of Connect-Care, Parkwood's emergency call service, and president of Ontario Personal Emergency Response Association.

With seniors staying in their homes longer, new businesses crop up all the time to meet the growing demand for emergency call systems, Smith said.

Not all are bad, but she's heard of salespeople threatening seniors they'd have to go into a home if they didn't buy. She knows of companies whose prices range from \$400 to \$1,200, apparently depending on the senior's affluence.

"If you're 89 years old, what do you need a \$1,200 unit for? How long are you going to need it?" Smith asks.

The Parkwood service rents — not sells — units and charges a monthly fee. Hospital volunteers keep the program going, including phoning seniors who forget to test their units.

Paddick's only just begun to fight. She's pleased her grandmother's on the Parkwood service but wants more controls on the industry.

She wants to see seniors and their families who've paid for a little peace of mind to actually get it.

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