

# Getting on with some help

More gadgets have surfaced in the market here to help the elderly live independently. Are they catching on with the silver set?



Lea Wee

**M**r Eric Lee, 52, became worried when he did not hear from his aunt for three days last year. When he finally went to the three-room flat where she lived alone, he found her sick in bed, too weak to even get to the telephone in the living room.

The incident prompted him to buy an emergency alert device, which she could use to reach him immediately during an emergency.

Madam Lee Ah Gim, 92, now wears the device as a pendant around her neck. In an emergency, she can press a button which would prompt a 24-hour call centre to dispatch an ambulance to her home and alert Mr Lee at the same time.

Emergency alert devices are among the many products, largely designed in the West, that have emerged in recent years to champion independent living among the elderly here.

There are also gadgets which allow seniors to reach an object on a high shelf, thread a needle or open a can without overstretching themselves.

One enables women to hook on their bras using only one hand. Then there are cellphones with large-font displays and loud



ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Mr Eric Lee showing his aunt, Madam Lee Ah Gim, 92, how to use the eAlert! which comes with a base and a pendant. To get help, Madam Lee presses a button on the pendant, which can be worn around the neck, wrist or waist, and she will be able to speak to a trained staff member from a 24-hour call centre.

ringtones as well as "talking clocks" which respond to verbal commands. Mobility scooters allow seniors who cannot walk far to continue going to the supermarket or community club.

There are umbrellas which double as walking sticks and walking sticks that come with a built-in torch and strobe lights to make elderly pedestrians more visible to motorists.

Some of these gadgets will go on show this weekend at the 50plus Expo, the only consumer fair here targeted at baby boomers.

But the gadgets have been slow to catch on with the silver set here.

Mr Michael Pang, founder of Lifeline Corporation, a health-care equipment company, blamed it on the over reliance of Singaporeans on domestic helpers.

He said: "Older people who have problems buttoning their own shirt, for instance, would rather get their maid to do it than use a button hook."

Such products have never made up more than 5 per cent of the company's turnover since it was set up in 1991. Its core business is in rehabilitative equipment.

This is in contrast to the United States and Europe, where such products are widely used by the elderly who live alone.

Mr Pang said cost could be another factor, with the prices of these products usually being higher than those meant for the mass market.

For example, a can opener designed for older people may cost \$30, compared to the usual can opener, which may cost \$3.

But Mr Kenneth Lam, the operations manager of geriatric medicine at Khoo Teck Puat hospital, believes the price of the products will drop once there is a market for them.

Right now, not many know such items exist, he said.

The hospital set up a retail arm, the Able Studio, last year to advise customers on retrofitting their homes to make it safer for the elderly, among other things.

Said Mr Lam: "There are those who are not aware that you can use a non-slip solution on your floor, for instance."

But he believes that the level of awareness will go up once more companies enter the business.

Given Singapore's greying population, companies are indeed interested.

Philips Electronics, for instance, plans to bring home health-care devices under Philips Lifeline to Singapore. A number of local companies are working with the >60 Design Centre to create products for seniors. In the meantime, those who recently came on board are quietly confident that theirs is a "sunrise industry".

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Demand will rise, said Mr Warren Chew, 35, who was inspired by a friend's experience to set up Falcon Mobility in 2008.

His friend, who has spinal muscular atrophy, had to wait three months to fix the spare parts of his motorised wheelchair. Falcon Mobility, which sells motorised wheelchairs and mobility scooters, promises to fix any problems within two days. It also offers a three-day free trial for potential buyers.

The disabled-friendly company has four staff members, including a former customer, now its sale executive, who has amputated right toes and arthritis.

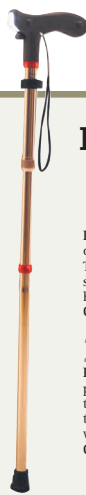
"It would be good news for consumers if such companies thrived," said Mr Lam from the Khoo Teck Puat Hospital.

The trained physiotherapist said elderly-friendly products can help people cope with aged-related changes, such as poorer eyesight and hearing, and becoming less flexible and mobile.

He said: "For instance, with a simple thing like the needle threader, the elderly person does not need to give up sewing altogether."

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The 50plus Expo, organised by the Council For Third Age, is open from tomorrow till Sunday at the Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre, Level 4, Halls 401 to 403, from 11am to 9pm (tomorrow and Saturday) and 10am to 8pm (Sunday). Admission is free.



## Elderly-friendly gadgets

### 1 Walking stick

Designed in Britain.

Features: It has a headlight on the hand grip and red flashing strobe lights on the stick stem (left) to make the elderly pedestrian more visible at night.

There is also a button which sets off an alarm in an emergency and a small round magnet which an elderly person can use to pick up the keys he or she might have dropped.

Cost: \$69.90, Bion Advance (tel: 6777-8467).

### 2 Emergency response system (see main picture above)

Designed in the United States.

Features: The eAlert! comes with a base and a pendant. If an elderly person falls down in the bathroom, for instance, he can press a button on the pendant, which can be worn around the neck, wrist or waist, and speak to a trained staff member from a 24-hour call centre. The staff member will then dispatch an ambulance and notify the next of kin.

Cost: Monthly subscription fee of \$38.52 (promotion price), Active Medical

(tel: 6344-9223).

Other emergency alert systems are available at Elderwise Living (tel: 6456-8358).

### 3 Elderly-friendly cellphone

Made in Singapore.

Features: The Ino Mobile (above) has a large number display and louder ringtones. It also has an SOS button at the back. The user can key in the names and contact numbers of up to four people and in an emergency, he

can be connected to one of them by activating the button. There is also a light button on the top right corner of the phone.

Cost: \$88, Foresight Technologies (tel: 6241-2186).

### 4 Talking clock

Designed by Moshi in the US.



Features: No need to fiddle with small knobs and buttons. Just ask for the time and this talking clock (below left) will give you the answer. It can obey up to 12 voice commands, including orders to set the time, alarm and temperature.

Caveat: It understands commands in English only.

Cost: \$68 (promotion price), Elderwise Living (tel: 6456-8358).

### 5 Buckingham bra angel

Designed in Britain.

Features: A woman can put on her bra single-handedly with this bra angel (right). Holding the pink heart in place with her chin, she uses her good hand to place one end of the bra into the gripper in front of her waist.

The bra is in an upside down, inside-out position. Then she brings the other end of the bra across her waist to the front of her body and hooks it on.

The gripper is removed and the bra is manoeuvred into place.

Cost: \$73, United BMEC (tel: 6305-2536)



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