

UK police to track dementia patients using GPS

May 1 2013, by Maria Cheng



This undated photo released by Chichester District Council shows Gill Stoneham, who has dementia, and her husband Bernard in Chichester, England. British police force Sussex police in Southeast England is hoping to save time and money by giving a few dementia patients GPS tracking devices, a move condemned by some campaigners as "barbaric." The device can be worn around the neck or attached to a keychain and sends the person's GPS location to a website every four minutes which can be accessed by the patient's family. The National Pensioners Convention on Wednesday May 1, 2013, slammed the idea as inhumane, arguing patients could be stigmatized and made to feel like criminals. (AP Photo/Peter Langdown)

(AP)—A British police force is hoping to save time and money by giving a few dementia patients GPS tracking devices, a technique already used by health and welfare agencies but condemned by some campaigners as "barbaric."

Last week, Sussex police in southeast England announced a plan to buy GPS devices for a few people with dementia who are at high risk of getting lost. The police couldn't say how many devices would be bought but have invested >600 (\$935) into the program. Each tracking device costs about >28 (\$43) a month, which will be paid by the family of the dementia patient.

The device can be worn around the neck or attached to a keychain. It sends the person's GPS location to a website every four minutes. The information can also be accessed by the patient's family.

Chief Inspector Tanya Jones described it as a "cost-effective" strategy which would save police time and resources by not having to frequently search for lost patients.

The National Pensioners Convention on Wednesday slammed the idea as inhumane, arguing patients could be stigmatized and made to feel like criminals. "Dementia patients need human interaction, not tagging," Dot Gibson, general secretary of the group, said in a statement.

Dementia patients "haven't committed any crime—they've just grown old," she said. "This is just about saving money rather than treating people with dignity."

Bernard Stoneham of Chichester recently signed up his wife Gill, who has dementia, for the device after a neighbor found her wandering near a busy road. The day after she got the GPS tracker, Stoneham used the service to find his wife after she got lost and then fell down on a short

walk.

"All I can say is how grateful I am to have had the use of this piece of hi-tech wizardry and what a difference it makes at this difficult time in our lives," Stoneham said in a statement released through the local government council.

Tracking devices for dementia and other vulnerable patients are increasingly used by Britain's health and social services agencies but this is the first time police have been involved. A program called Project Lifesaver is used by about 1,250 law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and Canada. Participants get a plastic bracelet with a waterproof radio transmitter that officers can use when alerted to quickly locate a person.

In the U.S., the Alzheimer's Association sells a device and system that alerts families when the patient leaves a designated zone. In March, a sheriff in Utah proposed using ankle monitors for Alzheimer's patients.

Some experts said the GPS technology could be enormously helpful if used properly.

"This could empower people to be freer in terms of their movement and give families peace of mind, but the challenge is to ensure the patients' civil liberties are being respected," said Dr. Julia Botsford, research lead for the charity Dementia U.K. She said such devices could allow dementia patients to live longer on their own.

"It's vital (that) consent is always sought from a person with dementia, unless their carer or family member has power of attorney and makes decisions on their behalf," said Chris Quince, senior policy officer at Britain's Alzheimer's Society.

"Any attempt to determine what is best for an individual who does not

have capacity to consent would require careful inquiry and judgment," he said in an email. "Any tracking system must support and never replace good quality care."

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