

## **Ethical Issues in Alzheimer's Researchers with Human Subjects Techno-Surveillance of the Elderly: Care, Concern, or Coercion?**

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### *Abstract*

Elderly parents living on their own is an increasing concern across countries and continents. Smaller families and the entry of women into the workforce makes it more difficult for families to care for aging parents. In countries as large and mobile as the US, it is not uncommon for people to be living an eight hour plane ride away from their parents.

Technology seeks to fill this gap in a number of ways. Most obviously, email, cheap phone plans, Skype, and social media make it easier for grandparents to connect with grandchildren on a daily basis, and for adult children to check in on their parents. But there is also a growing host of devices that, in one way or another, provide various kinds of surveillance to reassure families and to alert community health services when things go wrong.

- Video monitoring (via webcam)
- Sensor monitoring (can be attached to refrigerator door, pillbox, front door, etc. to monitor activity)
- Wearable sensors collect data such as heart rate and blood pressure
- “Smart” carpets check gait for early detection of dementia
- Sensors monitor how often the toilet is flushed

Many articles about these devices situate them as partial solutions to ongoing struggles between aging parents who want to hold on to their independence even if it means taking some risks, and their harried, frustrated, and guilt-ridden adult children. Some aging people welcome these devices, which allow them to live independently but with a safety net. Others, however, resent this degree of intrusion. In this situation, it is easy to imagine family members using these surveillance devices without their parents’ knowledge and consent.

How should we think about these new devices, ethically and legally? Is it ever ethical for children to install monitors without their parents’ knowledge? What if the children have some sort of legal responsibility for community-dwelling parents, e.g. conservatorship? Are there usual analogies between this situation and the situation of parents balancing between keeping teenagers safe and respecting their privacy? If we believe that sensors should only be installed with consent of the person being monitored, how can we enforce that principle? Perhaps laws could require that all such monitors be programmed to announce their presence periodically?