

MY PANIC BUTTON

Book: You Could Lose an Eye: My First 80 years in Montreal by David Reich – bio below

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Editor's Note: This column is a guest-article penned by architect and author David Reich (full bio below).

I'm a lucky man.

My six children hover over me like guardian angels – I can almost hear their wings beating. One is in Montreal, another five are scattered across the continent. But no matter how distant, the kids constantly worry about me. They've noticed that my aging legs aren't as spry as they used to be. They never were, but no one worried then. Now, because I live alone, they fear I might fall, do myself an injury, lie helpless, unable to contact anyone. They're tormented by these thoughts. They call, even long distance: "Are you all right? We can't sleep, can't concentrate on our careers, our children." My 14 grandchildren are also very concerned, but hide it better. I speak to them on the phone and sense their poorly concealed anxiety.

"How are you, Jonas?" I ask.

"Gud."

"How's school?"

"Gud."

"Your lessons?"

Gud."

All the others are much the same. They're terrified to ask about me. I might have had a kidney stone, a gall stone, a bladder stone – they're afraid I might turn into a quarry.

Yes, I'm lucky. They all worry. It makes me feel warm inside.

Let me give you an example.

"Get an electronic medical alert!" my children urged. "It could save your life! You could have a stroke, trip on a rug, get hit by a swinging refrigerator door – no one would know!" They sent me pamphlets, names and addresses of suppliers of these devices. They cared. And it wasn't because, if I'm invalided, one of them, chosen by drawing a card, will be obliged to phone me once a week, drop in every month, transport me in a special vehicle to their home to be displayed on birthdays and other noisy occasions and even, God forbid, sit around in a dimly lit hospital waiting room looking at year old torn magazines hoping to ask a doctor if I've regained

consciousness. Or they might discreetly whisper: "Does he have much time? I've got to get back to the office." I slept soundly at night, comforted by their anxieties.

I had my own reasons for not getting a medical alert. I don't advertise it, but I have serious problems with buttons. Take my cell phone. My 24 button basic model controls four text input methods, one-touch or two-touch speed dialing, a call history, a phone directory, codes that receive, forward, and record messages, an inbox, an outbox, a scheduler, an alarm; the damn thing can be locked, unlocked or just latched, it offers a choice of 25 melodies, five bell tones, a world clock, a stopwatch, a calculator, a calendar, a sun dial, a blood pressure gauge and maybe a blender and microwave; it also predicts tidal flows and moon phases. The 120 page manual is translated from the Japanese – they needn't have bothered.

Then I have a VCR that anyone with a doctorate in electronics can readily program in a week; it's next to an entertainment centre where I entertain myself trying to find a commercial-free radio station; also a digital camera that takes excellent photos of any of my digits I place in front of the lens – the list is endless. I wasn't in a hurry to add a medical alert to my collection of unworkable gadgets, even to save my life. It just wasn't worth it.

But I couldn't ignore the anxieties of my children and grandchildren. I don't have a selfish bone in my body. Catering to their concerns, I obtained a electronic medical alert catalogue. I immediately opened it – it displayed least 50 models – I immediately closed it. I could no better understand it than I could a menu in an Indian restaurant.

I phoned the company. A voice confided that my call was important to him, that it might be monitored to ensure quality and to hold for a Representative. I held. Periodically the voice asked if I was still alive. During the time I held, in some foreign clime a marriage was arranged, a Representative was conceived, gestated, born, raised, hired, taught English and handed the telephone.

I begged this Representative to send a Live Person to my home with a device that would allow me to safely fall down stairs, have a stroke or choke on a sausage. Within two months the Live Person appeared with the device. You understand that to be effective the alert must alertly communicate with the outside world – in this case via my burglar alarm system, that I cannot program either. Fortunately neither can housebreakers – that's why I've never been housebroken. The Live Person re-wired my entire house in a single day and gave me a little box. It had only two buttons. But, in an emergency, I had to remember to push both them at the same time – /'simultaneously',/I believe was the word he used. I repeated it until I thoroughly understood the instruction. It's now my mantra – ten minutes a day I chant: /'Simultaneously'./

I don't have to program my medical alert to make it waterproof. It's multi-functional – it can hang from my neck, strap around my wrist or clip to my belt. And I have been assured that if I depress both buttons /'simultaneously'/ a medical

team, skilled in CPR, Heimlich maneuvers or heart transplants will, within seconds, be kneeling beside my body. It re-assures me. I can hardly wait.

However, I don't know if the electronic medical alert works. I walked through my house seeking a stairway I could fall down comfortably. But I was afraid that I might not be incapacitated and the effort would be wasted. So I'm holding off. I may settle for slipping in the shower.

On that occasion, I'll press my two buttons /'simultaneously'/'. Given my experience, I expect that a phone will ring in some central office – I think in Islamabad. It will be immediately answered and a voice will intone: "Your call is important to us. It may be monitored to ensure quality. Please hold for a representative."

Well, at least my children and their offspring now sleep more soundly, knowing I'm electronically protected. If not for them, I might be lying at the foot of those stairs with the loose carpet, or sprawled in that shower cursing a slippery bar of soap, or choking on a large bite of very hard salami, or rattling one internal stone against another.

But, in the meantime, when my kids phone to ask how I am, I say: "Gud. And bless you all."

David Reich was born and seasoned in Montreal. Burdened by university degrees from McGill (B. Arch) and Concordia (M. Eng), he enjoyed a 55-year career as an architect in many countries, and taught construction technologies at Dawson College and Vanier College for twenty years. Now in his anecdotage, he concentrates on the pleasures and disappointments of writing, and has published 12 books. Recently, encouraged by the enthusiastic acclaim of six children and 15 grandchildren he convinced an unsuspecting editor (Baraka Books) to publish a memoir: "You Could Lose an Eye: My First 80 years in Montreal", also available in French (Les Editions de Septentrion).