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Quebec-made GPS bracelet can help save lives of Alzheimer's patients

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A bracelet with a built-in Global Positioning System has helped rescue as many as 1,000 people with Alzheimer's disease since it was introduced in France four months ago.

The Columba bracelet manufactured by Medical Intelligence Technologies Inc. of Quebec City is expected to be available in Canada this year.

About 25,000 Canadians with Alzheimer's, 3,700 in Quebec, now rely on a bracelet that identifies them to police only after they are found. The Columba bracelet can lead police to the missing person.

With "our winters, the first couple of hours after someone is found to be missing, are crucial," said Michael Arruda.

An adviser on mental health issues to the Montreal police, Arruda said one or two Alzheimer's sufferers in the Greater Montreal region go missing and die every year because they are not found fast enough.

On Friday, a Montreal man was found dead in a snowbank two hours after he wandered out of his long-term-care facility in Beaconsfield. The Quebec coroner's office identified the man as Emilien-Gérald Daigle, 94.

Louis Massicotte of Medical Intelligence Technologies, the inventor of the Columba, said

his bracelet's GPS turns on when its wearer goes beyond predetermined boundaries.

Since it became commercially available in France, he said, it has helped track down about 1,000 people.

He said he got the idea of putting a GPS tracking system in a bracelet after his own mother went missing from her Quebec City home twice in the same winter.

Luckily, he said, she was found

the first time indoors at a shopping mall within two hours and the second time she came home in a taxi.

As for the Montreal man who died Friday after going missing from Manoir Beaconsfield, a Quebec coroner's inquiry is now looking into what could have saved his life.

Some institutions, including Maimonides Geriatric Centre in Côte St. Luc equip patients with bracelets that trip an alarm if a patient wanders off, alerting staff.

Yesterday, staff at the Woodland Ave. home refused comment except to say that the incident was "an unfortunate accident."

"In our 25 years, nothing like this has ever happened before," said one staff member who refused to give her name.

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