

SAFE COMMUNITY



PERSONAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE SYSTEMS

David Thomas

In a 1970s James Bond movie "Q" briefs 007 on the latest device to get him out of trouble in confronting foreign agents. "Q" says: "here 007, take this device which is the size of a watch and when you press this button it shows us exactly where you are and we can communicate directly with you anytime, any place" – exciting stuff, welcome to the world of PERS; in other words Personal Emergency Response Systems. Of course what "Q" was referring to at that time was only in the world of fiction, but this has now become a reality that is available and affordable by all.

Every so often a system comes along incorporating the latest technology which represents a major step forward in the world of public safety, not just the safety of agents; something that really "knocks your socks off!"

PERS in global terms is not new, but the latest technology has resulted in such systems being available and affordable by all in the Algarve, whereas previously it had been limited to James Bond movies.

This feature, therefore, looks at the development of PERS, what exactly they do and how they can in certain instances be a lifesaver.

Background and development

To me the impact of this innovation will be similar to that in the 1850s when in the

USA Edwin Holmes coupled a spring to a door, and connected this to an electrical circuit and a bell, thus resulting in the first household alarm. This technology was later purchased by the Telephone and Telegraphic Service in the USA and became the world's first monitored alarm system. Things however have moved on a bit since then.

The background to PERS lies in the development of social alarms in the UK. For more than two decades under the broader umbrella of Telecare, the development of such products has been aimed at providing a communications infrastructure using technology which allows the elderly and vulnerable people live their lives independently. Typically this has been aimed at those with

medical conditions whereby they may need to summon help quickly, and those with psychological needs.

Originally Telecare products were used in the home, garden or institutions due to restrictions of the equipment. Telecare products are often in the form of a pendant that is wirelessly connected to a hub in the house and generally has a range of perhaps 15 metres.

Starting in the UK some 10 years ago, some police forces made Telecare-type products available to victims of domestic violence so they could contact a person in a control centre in times of need. *Age Concern*, also based in the UK, has adopted these with devices that work within the confines of your home and garden.

Today the PERS market still encompasses Telecare, but the scope of PERS now available in the Algarve has moved well beyond that described earlier.

PERS today

What we have today is an "alignment" where the devices and systems that were once only seen in Bond movies – a tracker, a phone and GPS receiver – are incorporated in one device that is so small and compact and is now affordable to the masses.

The latest system recently introduced in the Algarve allows the user to summon help anywhere in Portugal by simply pressing a button on the device. This immediately shows a trained operator in a fully manned control



centre your exact location on a map with GPS coordinates. The controller or user can open up a two-way voice contact enabling the nature of the emergency to be identified and what type of help is required. This information is then passed directly to the emergency services. Operators at the centre are bilingual, overcoming hitherto communication problems due to language difficulties.

The major difference or change since Telecare started is the cost and range of use of the support systems i.e. GSM and GPS services. Also the battery life has changed enormously with one company in the Algarve providing a PERS device that lasts seven to eight days without the need for a recharge. Other devices often require charging once a day. Unlike household alarms which can be relatively expensive, PERS are now available at less than €20 per month with no upfront costs.

Applications

The range of applications for PERS is considerable. For instance, your child who wants the independence to go to school by himself, your teenage daughter who goes out at weekends, sports and other active people, people living in isolated areas or those who see themselves as a target for mugging/robbery - there is a whole range of people who would find use in a personal emergency response system.

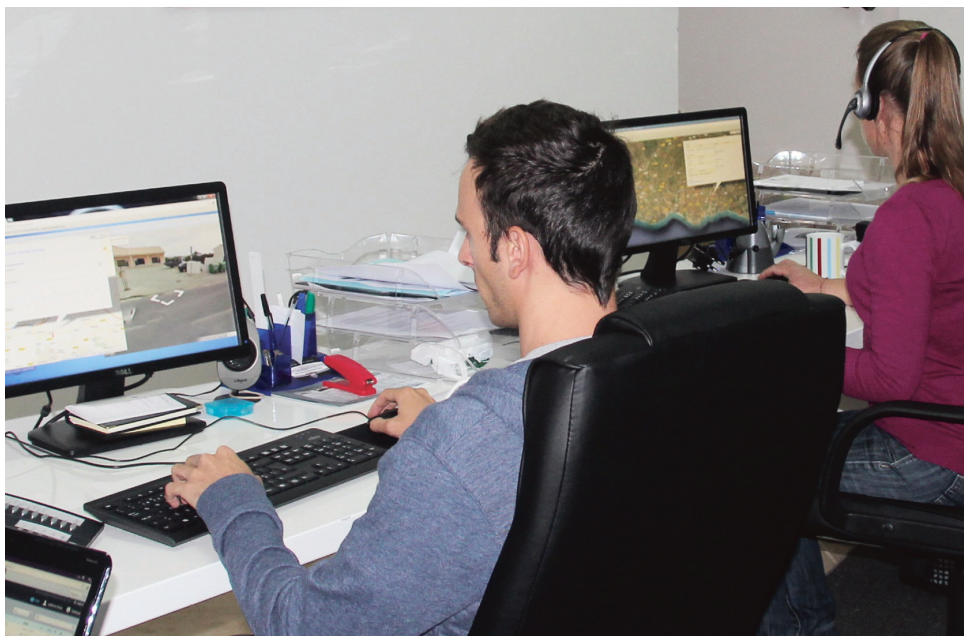
Safe Communities Algarve sees this as a system that can be a lifesaver for the general public, not just the elderly or disabled. The cost has come down, the technology has sky rocketed, so it is now something that all people can have, all the time, practically anywhere to use for any emergency or difficult situation.

For the Algarve, where language can be a problem, it is a major plus to have a translation service on your belt or set of keys as a minimum, and then all the resources and training behind it make for a great safety net and back up when it is needed.

Safe Communities Algarve advice

At present there are only one or two suppliers of such systems in the Algarve, with one other believed to be in the development stage. Like monitored alarms it is important to check that those providing such systems operate through properly-licensed monitoring systems using trained operators with bilingual skills in English and Portuguese, and ideally other languages.

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David Thomas is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police, consultant to INTERPOL and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In October 2011 he formed Safe Communities Algarve an on-line platform here in the Algarve to help the authorities and the community prevent crime. 913 045 093
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