



Products for dementia patients include easy-to-use cutlery, a wearable airbag to protect against falls, a seal that makes friendly noises when stroked, and a clock giving the time of day

Robot seal dives in to help fight dementia

Nicholas Hellen, Social Affairs Editor

A FRIENDLY robotic seal, a wearable airbag and a clock that announces “now it’s Sunday morning” are among a range of new products aimed at dementia sufferers.

Argos, the catalogue store, and the Lloyds pharmacy chain are showing interest in the range catering to Britain’s

850,000 dementia sufferers, which will be launched in June on a website stocking 1,000 products.

The venture, which will have commercial backing from the Alzheimer’s Society, is the brainchild of a young entrepreneur who devoted his twenties to caring for his mother after she fell victim to dementia at the shockingly early age of 54.

James Ashwell, 34, founder of Unforgettable.org, said: “Dealing with dementia is not sexy or interesting — it’s grim, which is why there’s such a gap for products that can make life more bearable. I decided that if nobody else was doing it, I needed to do it.”

Ashwell first realised his mother, Fay, had a problem when she terrified him and a school friend by driving home to Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham, on the wrong side of the road when they were passengers in the car.

His father took responsibility for her care, but when he

died suddenly of a rare disease, Ashwell gave up his job as a consultant in the oil and gas industry. At 24 he became her main carer, although he was helped for long periods by his brother and sister, until she died in 2011.

Meal times would often become an ordeal lasting two hours as his mother struggled to cope with conventional cutlery and chased food around the plate. She also had trouble swallowing. However painful the process, Ashwell knew that if he did not help her to eat enough she would lose weight and weaken.

The experience helped con-

vince him of the benefits of a matching set of curved cutlery and crockery.

She enjoyed assembling jigsaws, but, because she could only put together two, four or eight pieces, the only games available had pictures intended for toddlers.

Ashwell admits the indignity probably dismayed him more than his mother, but has ensured that jigsaws to be sold on the site will therefore feature more grown-up images.

A wearable airbag attached to a belt is designed to prevent hip breaks, one of the main causes of hospital admissions for people with dementia. The

complex electronics detect the difference between walking down steps and falling.

Many other products that could help dementia sufferers have so far been sold only in small volumes.

A meeting with Zoltan Bozoky, the government's chief strategy officer for tackling dementia, convinced Ashwell that the time was right to create a mass-market venture.

He received initial funding from the charitable arm of Bridges Ventures and in 2013 he got the backing of Jeremy Hughes, chief executive of the Alzheimer's Society. Unforgettable.org now has £2m fund-

ing, with the prospect of a further £5m.

Suppliers to the website are offering smart insoles, which fit any shoe and track dementia sufferers via GPS, and home monitoring systems that send alerts if the person does not follow their usual routine.

Another product is an online system of financial controls, intended to protect vulnerable people from being exploited. It allows a representative to block online, phone and mail order purchases, and imposes checks on the amount paid out to tradesmen, to catch cow-boys.

A clock that dispenses with potentially confusing digital displays, and simply states the time of day ("now it's Sunday morning") is already a big seller. A robotic seal provides companionship, making friendly noises when stroked, and a robotic puppet, called Casper, is able to speak and issue gentle instructions and reminders. Other new products include a device that gives out appetising smells, a simple tablet computer, and rip-proof Velcro clothing.

Hughes said: "Making these



James Ashwell cared for his mother, Fay, after she developed Alzheimer's aged 54

products more easily accessible will mean more people with dementia will be able to retain their independence for longer.

"I have a vision that you'll be able to walk into a high street store and find these sitting alongside the many other specialised products you can buy today and we're already talking to major retailers to make this happen."

Lloyds pharmacy said it had

"been made aware of a new product range, and, as a corporate supporter of the Dementia Friends movement we are interested to learn more". Argos, which is also a corporate Dementia Friend, said: "We watch developments with interest."

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