Special Article

The Canadian Medic-Alert Foundation

A. Larry Stevenson

A little girl, Linda Collins, cut her finger while playing. Taken to hospital to have it sutured she was routinely tested for tetanus antitoxin sensitivity. Within minutes she was in violent anaphylactic shock. It was touch and go for several days. The year was 1956, the place Turlock, California. Linda's father, Dr. Marion Collins, decided then that a distinctive ident must be devised to prevent a repetition for Linda and countless others with hidden medical problems. It was an idea whose time had come. Today, 27 years later, the Medic-Alert trademark is registered worldwide and there are active homegrown affiliate organizations operating in 17 countries.

Medic-Alert affiliates are independent self-starters. The nucleus can be a service club, a professional association, government or simply a group of concerned private citizens. The common denominator is that they borrow some of Dr. Collins' sensitivity and drive, follow a standard method of presenting member records and issue recognizable copies of the original registered ident. Affiliates are represented on an International Board and meet regularly at Turlock headquarters to discuss common problems. Medic-Alert's obligation to other international medical associated groups such as the World Health Organization (WHO) is also their concern. Medic-Alert is the only medical problem ident service fully recognized and a member of WHO.

Canadians became aware of Dr. Collins' idea in 1961. Ralph Finkle, a Toronto sales manager with a

penicillin allergy, read about it in an industrial publication. Andrew Cowans, a popular Montreal radio personality took the word off a news wire. Dr. Maureen Roberts, a Halifax based professor and medical researcher saw an article in a U.S. trades journal. They all wrote Turlock. By coincidence a Toronto travel operator, Gordon Girvan, was strolling the beach in Antigua that early Spring. He happened upon a delightful couple there and they had dinner. The vacationers were Doctor and Mrs. Collins. The doctor now had a personal Canadian contact. He was a man of action. On March 24, 1961 the names he knew gathered upon invitation in a Toronto hotel suite for an exploratory meeting. The Collinses were there with their lawyer. Within hours Canada had its own Medic-Alert, an agreement was reached to apply for a Canadian Charter and the U.S. had its first affiliate. It would be operated simply by public-spirited citizens. As the historic meeting broke up Dr. Collins handed Finkle a personal cheque for \$1,000. He said, "This will get you started. I don't care when you repay it but I trust Canada will be so successful that I get it back soon."

Ralph Finkle was appointed president of the fledgling organization, Andrew Cowans, vice president, Maureen Roberts and Gordon Girvan were directors. From their friends, Alex Taylor C.A., retired investment broker, became treasurer and public relations man Larry Stevenson took care of printmatter and publicity. Ada Adamson, a retired secretary of several service organizations moved in as office staff. George Tiviluk of Cameron, Godfrey and Lewtas provided solicitor skills to a charter application and the Toronto accounting firm Clarkson, Gordon offered their auditing expertise through its president Jack Wilson.

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Canadian Medic-Alert received its charter of incorporation dated July 18, 1961. New friends offered help. The first member application was soon written. A local publisher of the *Toronto Telegram*, John Bassett, donated the first 25,000 print run. Radio spots and news releases followed. That year ended with 661 members and a \$689.52 loss. From that day Canadian Medic-Alert Foundation took off. For the promise it held, Canadian Medic-Alert adopted an unusual philosophy. It would operate nationally from one central location, run by two or three volunteers. They would concentrate on a holding action, in the knowledge that the need was there. They estimated that one in five Canadians required the service. The operation would be kept simple and low-cost. Friendly media would be regularly fed information of the non-profit offer of peace-of-mind. Organized fund-raising and subsidies search was avoided to gain time to develop a most knowledgeable, dedicated and sensitive staff. The no-nonsense approach has over the years won the support of doctors, nurses, police, hospitals, first aid schools, special interest medical problem associations and most importantly, Medical Association and Life Underwriter appointed representation on Medic-Alert Directors and Advisory Boards.

The Medic-Alert system of medical problem identification is simple and direct. The member pays \$15.00 as a one-time fee. For this, a virtually indestructible stainless steel bracelet or necklet is supplied. The problem is engraved together with the lifetime serial number and an emergency telephone number. This switchboard is international and complete information as to members' identity, next of kin and doctors' phone numbers is available

anywhere a member travels world-wide, together with a more complete record of the medical problem in emergency, if this is necessary. The call need not be made if the member is carrying the Medic-Alert wallet card issued with the ident. The card has the member's complete record which is updated as directed for the member's lifetime at no charge.

The Medic-Alert system identifies over 10,000 medical problem combinations. These fall under six general types: allergies; drug dependency; post-surgery information; prosthesis; occupational hazards; as a simple identification with direction for the lost retarded youngster or the disoriented older citizen. The idents are non-toxic, do not tarnish and have endured to identify unrecognizable victims of fire and air tragedy and bodies long submerged after drowning accidents. The uncomplicated Medic-Alert system has been used by a number of researchers and most spectacularly in the search continent-wide and identification of potential malignant hyperthermia victims. The message covering this originally was much too long. It took hours of rephrasing and contraction to make it fit available engraving and wallet card space. Wording was worked out with Dr. Britt of the University of Toronto. Anaesthetists will not be surprised to learn that the registry of patients with sensitivity to succinylcholine due to atypical plasma cholinesterase is growing at Medic-Alert.

Canadian Medic-Alert has for its 22 years lived within its means. Canadian Medic-Alert survives very well without government grants, with no aid from big business, no assistance from organized labour and without fund raising. Of course the \$15.00 membership does not support the current staff of 14. Nor does it underwrite over \$100,000 in free record changes annually. Medic-Alert continues because of the totally unsolicited dollar, two and sometimes more, gifted by grateful members for its help in their own particular medical emergency. And a fund is building to continue that protection well into the future should all else fail. To-day over a million Canadians trust Medic-Alert, increasing annually by over 30,000 new members and their family physician, specialist and next of kin.