

Ottawa engineer calls for industry to lead in fall prevention

November 7, 2019 (Ottawa, ON) – November is Fall Prevention Month and, as health and safety organizations work to raise Canadians’ awareness of how to protect themselves from falls, design engineer John O’Brien is calling on industry to lead by changing the conversation about aging and by creating safer spaces.

More than 1.6 million Canadian seniors fall each year. The number could climb significantly as 23 percent of the population passes the age of 65 by 2030 due to demographic trends.

“People downplay the impact of falls,” says O’Brien, President and CEO of HealthCraft Products, “but the effects can be life-changing — compromising mobility, creating chronic pain and mental health issues, and diminishing people’s quality of life.”

Beyond the person injured, falls also affect families and friends, caregivers and the health system. While a large proportion of falls are preventable, stigma about aging remains a powerful barrier to making living environments safer.

“All of us as industry players have to work together to raise awareness about the harms of falls and shift people’s attitudes,” says O’Brien. “Many people see installing a grab bar or shower seat as an admission that they are aging and not as strong or healthy as they used to be. We need to change the conversation so people see these devices as a proactive approach to safety and a way to claim independence. The goal is to make every space a safer space.”

O’Brien is calling on homebuilders and designers, occupational therapists, product manufacturers, and construction regulators to contribute collectively to fall prevention. He says industry needs to normalize the conversation around aging and falls and advocate for innovations. Those can range from improved safety standards in building codes to novel technologies that let people remain independent and in their homes longer — to “age in place”.

O’Brien’s company is contributing to these efforts with innovative solutions that make homes and residences as safe as possible. HealthCraft draws on multidisciplinary expertise in accessibility, body mechanics and industrial design to develop products that are tailored to human mobility and can be installed almost anywhere.

“Our whole philosophy is that safety should come standard,” says O’Brien. “Seatbelts aren’t optional for cars. Why should safety devices in homes and buildings be any different?”

HealthCraft’s Invisia line of products was developed with the notion of seamless safety in mind, providing grab-bar-style supports in towel rods and other fixtures that don’t draw attention to themselves or radically alter living space.

O’Brien says smart design solutions can help overcome stigma by making fall prevention products less conspicuous and more subtly integrated into residential environments.

John O'Brien is a mechanical engineer on a mission to create functional solutions to common problems. That's what led him to co-found HealthCraft Products and Invisia, sister brands dedicated to improving safety in living spaces through innovative product development and manufacturing. As a member of the Canadian Home Builders' Association's Home Modification Council, he advocates for safety improvements to building codes. He has also been a panelist for a Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists Professional Issue Forum on aging in place.

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HealthCraft Fall Prevention backgrounder

Key facts and stats about falls:

Falls cause serious injuries.

- More than 1.6 million Canadian seniors fall each year, almost half experiencing serious injuries.¹
- The most common injuries from falls are broken or fractured bones (35%), sprains or strains (30%), and scrapes, bruises or blisters (19%).²
- 95% of hip fractures among older adults are the result of a fall.³

Falls often result in hospitalizations.

- Falls account for 85% of injury-related hospitalizations among older Canadians.⁴
- 67% of people who fell in 2010 went to the emergency department within 48 hours.⁵
- Half of all fall-related hospitalizations were the result of falls in the home.⁶
- Hospital stays among older adults who fell are three times longer than the average hospital stay among all age groups in Canada.⁷

Falls cost the healthcare system billions a year.

- Falls total roughly \$2 billion per year in direct costs to the healthcare system.⁸
- Reducing seniors' falls by 20% between 2010 and 2035 could save 4,400 lives and \$10.8 billion in healthcare costs.⁹

Falls are a leading cause of injury-related deaths.

- Nearly 20% of seniors die within one year of a fall.¹⁰
- In Canada, deaths from falls rose by 65% between 2003 and 2008.¹¹
- Falls are the main cause of injury-related deaths among U.S. adults 65 and older. The rate of death from fall-related injuries rose by 31% between 2007 and 2016.¹²

¹ Parachute: Falls in seniors. <https://parachute.ca/en/injury-topic/fall-prevention-for-seniors>

² Fall Prevention Month. <https://www.fallpreventionmonth.ca/uploads/2019%20toolkit/promotional%20materials/FPMFactBank-EN.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/migration/phac-aspc/seniors-aines/publications/public/injury-blessure/seniors_falls-chutes_aines/assets/pdf/infographic-infographie2_2015-eng.pdf

⁹ Parachute: Falls in seniors. <https://parachute.ca/en/injury-topic/fall-prevention-for-seniors>

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¹¹ Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/migration/phac-aspc/seniors-aines/publications/public/injury-blessure/seniors_falls-chutes_aines/assets/pdf/infographic-infographie2_2015-eng.pdf

¹² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6718a1.htm>

Falls will become an increasingly urgent issue as the population ages.

- 20–30% of seniors fall at least once per year.¹³
- The 2016 Census found there were more adults over the age of 65 than children under 15 in Canada, and the number of Canadians older than 85 is growing at four times the rate of the overall population.¹⁴

¹³ Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/migration/phac-aspc/seniors-aines/publications/public/injury-blessure/seniors_falls-chutes_aines/assets/pdf/infographic-infographie2_2015-eng.pdf

¹⁴ Parachute: Falls in seniors. <https://parachute.ca/en/injury-topic/fall-prevention-for-seniors>