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What happens if no one is sitting in a wheelchair but it's still moving? It used to be that you'd worry something bizarre was going on, but not any more. Now it may simply be that the device is being operated by remote control, via the Internet.

Ryerson University has developed a system by which wheelchairs and other assistive devices can be controlled by an operator who has an online connection. And they don't have to be nearby to make the chair move.

"While I'm only sitting ten feet away from the actual chair, I might as well be across the planet," explains Ryerson's Alexander Ferworn. "We can control this wheelchair from anywhere we have an Internet connection. Our project is called N.E.P.W.A.K.: network enabled power wheelchair adapter kit. Its inspiration is to try and help people who might require assistance from a distance." And he adds, "We can include the speed of transmission. We can improve the type of medical information we are able to send back and make it very reliable."

The project was funded by Microsoft and gives caregivers audio-visual contact with wheelchair users via the 'Net. And in an emergency, it lets those far away control the device.

And the invention is no surprise to industry experts.

"There's a lot of time, money, research being put into finding better ways to get more people around, despite whatever their individual needs are," says Stuart Lewis, V.P. of Marketing for Unicare. "Materials are getting lighter; products are actually becoming less expensive for the more common ones. The custom devices are still more expensive, but there are more of them."

- If you're interested in trying out one of the motorized wheelchairs, visit the Ontario Science Centre this Saturday.

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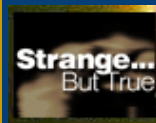
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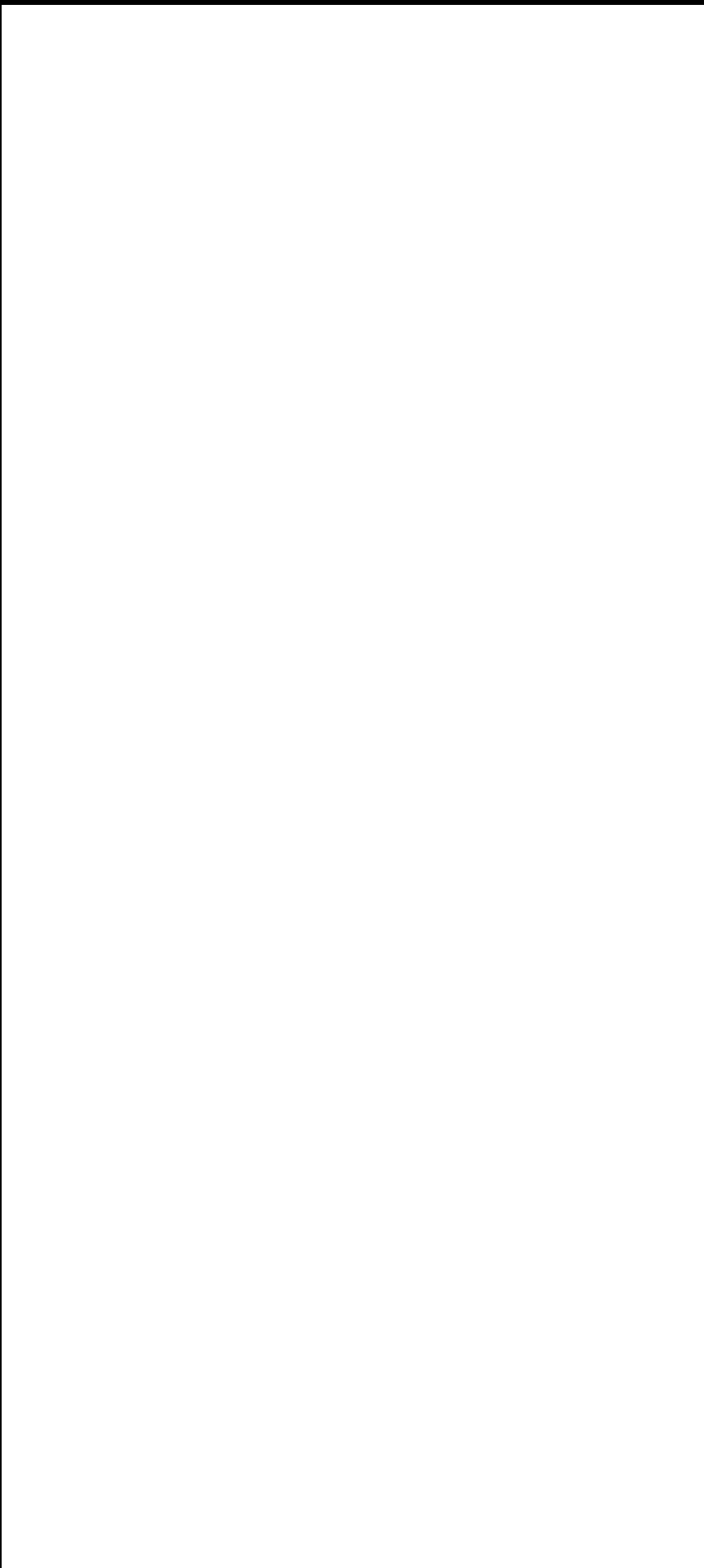
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