

Implant chips threaten privacy, says professor

Technology has outpaced safeguards: ethicist

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Microchips inserted under the skin that would allow medical staff to unlock patients' personal data -- including electronic health records stored in databases through a swift scan -- is cause for concern when it comes to privacy, surveillance and human rights, says a University of Ottawa professor.

"We're thinking of implanting chips in our bodies and we're not even thinking about the issues surrounding them," says Ian Kerr, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Ethics, Law and Technology. "The data flowing out of bodies in an age of human-machine mergers gives potential for our autonomy to be compromised."

Mr. Kerr, who is scheduled to speak Monday at an Ottawa conference on privacy, points to the example of a school near Sacramento, California, where parents were enraged to learn that their children had been made to wear badges outfitted with microchips. The badges allowed teachers carrying wireless devices to monitor the whereabouts of their students.

"I'm not someone who's against technology, but I am someone who thinks technology has a seductive way of rendering invisible some of the politics behind it," says Mr. Kerr, who believes the technology is poised to arrive in Canada.

His criticisms come as more than 1,100 U.S. physicians sign up to learn how to implant the radio frequency microchips that release a unique code identifying its owner. VeriChip Corp., the Florida-based company behind the technology, has given free equipment to 262 hospitals interested in using the chip to identify patients and retrieve their health records.

Worldwide, some 2,500 people have received VeriChip implants, including Harvard Medical School's chief information officer, Tommy Thompson, a former cabinet secretary for U.S. President George W. Bush and Mexico's attorney general. The chips have been approved for medical use in the U.S., but Canada has yet to do the same.

The rice-sized implants cost up to \$200 U.S., and there is an additional charge for a licensed physician to perform the implant. In New Jersey, Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield, a major health insurer, is offering it for free.

VeriChip chief executive officer Kevin McLaughlin dismissed privacy concerns, saying VeriChip offers secure software that guards against unauthorized access to personal information.

"I think there's a lot of miscommunication about what an implanted chip does," says Mr. McLaughlin, whose company, which has a branch office in Ottawa, is focused on the U.S. market, but hasn't ruled out expanding into Canada.

Mr. Kerr is urging federal officials to toughen their practices for approving such technologies before it's too late. In particular, he says, existing regulatory practices are not equipped to assess the safety of implantable microchips because they don't fit the definition of a medical device.

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