

10. Brother, Where Art Thou?

Citywatcher.com, a company that provides security surveillance equipment, sought a way to limit access to a vault containing sensitive data. It implanted a product called VeriChip in the arms of two of its employees. The VeriChip is a radio frequency identification device (RFID), a microchip about twice the length of a grain of rice that is implanted quickly and painlessly by a physician. It emits a code when scanned by special equipment at the vault's door, reading the 16-digit ID number that cross-references to a record in VeriChip's database.

RFIDs have been widely used for libraries, credit cards, roadway tolls, and other applications. The VeriChip Corporation of Delray Beach, Florida, has also made implantable chips that are widely used in pet dogs and cats so they can be identified if they get lost. The use of microchips in humans, however, has raised a number of concerns.

Critics worry that more and more uses will be found for the chips. They worry that a massive national database could be compiled, even though public opinion has consistently discouraged a national ID and its resulting comprehensive database. Critics also point out that inexpensive, handheld wireless readers can detect the numbers on the chips, leading to more privacy invasions. They worry that hacking or employee error could breach the security of such an extensive database. And even if it is secure and private now, government policy could change in the future, making the database available to government agencies and other parties.

Critics are concerned that chips may have health impacts. However, reports linking tumors with the VeriChip in a small percentage of animals have not been sufficiently documented to lead the US Food and Drug Administration to lift its approval of the device as safe for humans.

Involuntary implantation has been especially contentious. Controversy surrounds suggestions to implant chips in prisoners, guest workers, immigrants, newborns, Alzheimer's patients, and other vulnerable individuals. Advocates of 'chipping' contend that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, particularly for specialty security and medical uses. In fact, VeriChip has a variety of new product lines aimed at medical uses for storing medical information, tracing Alzheimer's patients, and tracing chemicals in cardiovascular applications, among others.

CityWatcher.com is not the first employer to require 'chipping.' The Attorney General of Mexico required his staff to be 'chipped' to access a vault of secure documents.

The potential uses of the chips worry many people. Several states have proposed legislation to prohibit involuntary use of the RFID devices in humans. In Pennsylvania hearings, VeriChip Corporation has made a clear statement supporting a law to ban involuntary implantation. States will need to determine whether employment-required implantation infringes on an employee's free choice, especially in an economy with scarce jobs.