Implantable Identification Devices: Should We Worry about Getting Chipped?

David B. Fletcher, Ph.D., Wheaton College (Wheaton, Illinois)

What if someday a computer identification chip—a chip able to contain any information storeable in a digital format—were to be implanted under your skin? Your identity, personal medical records, and other important information would be with you wherever you go, adding a level of convenience that would make the ATM card look like yesterday’s technology. What if that chip could monitor your vital signs and be used by others to locate you, using global positioning satellite technology, no matter where you might be? With this chip, you would, technically speaking, be a cyborg: part human, part machine. Would you welcome such a chip, or would you see it as a serious threat to your privacy and a potential tool of intrusive businesses and even oppressive governments?

Such a chip is not a heretical invention, but is here now and nearly ready to be used. It is the VeriChip, and its designer, Applied Digital Solutions of Florida, is seeking approval from the Food and Drug Administration to begin putting it to use. Its motto is “Get Chipped!” and it is reported that at least 2,500 people have already implanted the chips in order to test drive the device. The size of a grain of rice, it injects under the skin through a needle and will respond to standard handheld scanners. Applied Digital has a number of positive uses in mind for the chip, including the provision of medical information for people who become unconscious and the identification of lost Alzheimer’s patients. The chip could also be used along with tracking equipment to help locate lost or kidnapped people, kind of like a “LoJack” for humans (the LoJack is an electronic tracking device used to retrieve stolen automobiles).

Those who have a strong suspicion of technology in science that might be used to limit liberty and remove privacy will be concerned about this device. Anyone who has come to distrust such dystopian novels as Fahrenheit 451, 1984, Brave New World will likely be chilled by the announcement of the VeriChip. In addition, concerns have been raised regarding end-time prophecy by those wondering whether the chip could be the equivalent of the “mark of the beast” spoken about in Revelation. According to the Associated Press, Applied Digital has consulted with various theologians and religious leaders who have assured them that the chip doesn’t fit the biblical description of the mark because it is not something that is given out for free. The chip raises very serious questions about ethics and public policy, particularly in the area of invasion of privacy and surveillance—areas in which there is substantial literature in moral philosophy and political science. Privacy results from exercising the ability to control access to information about ourselves. At least in part, it is able to be kept secret and to share it when we choose, when we feel comfortable doing so. Controlling the flow of information increased with the ascent of the Internet, and we rightly regard invasions of our privacy as a threat to our freedom ofAssociation. 

Dr. Richard Seelig, the medical director of Applied Digital, who foresees that the device could function as a theft-proof, counterfeit-proof ID, like having a driver’s license that is tamper-proof and impossible to counterfeit, believes that airline pilots ought to be required by the government or by the airlines to have such chips. He believes that “security is the name of the game,” and believes that everyone who has yet to see the VeriChip镶嵌 in someone should see it before September 11th. A crucial aspect of privacy which should not be readily forfeited is medical confidentiality. Since the time of Hippocrates, ethical physicians have been concerned to protect medical confidentiality, including the confidentiality of patients’ medical records. Medical confidentiality is important for a number of reasons which are well documented in the literature about the ethics of privacy, not the least of which is the impact that inappropriate disclosures of patient information have on the care that physicians provide to their doctors personal information that is needed in order to receive the best care. Such confidentiality, of course, also extends to web-based medical databases, which would be dealt a death blow by the VeriChip, since a person with this chip would virtually be under a medical history on her sleeve, unable to protect it from the prying eyes of anyone who wishes to see it.

At Philosophical Bok has argued in his book, Federal ID, that there is nothing inherently wrong with using a “Lojack” for humans, as long as it doesn’t infringe upon one’s privacy. While Scripture makes clear that all thoughts and actions stand revealed to God, there are good reasons from a biblical perspective for not allowing that to happen to humans.

If coerced and invasive applications of the VeriChip will not take much time at all to develop and are already included in the company’s current plans. Time magazine reports that the company already plans to use it in non-intrusive ways, even coercive ways, stating that, “Security is part of the VeriChip business plan. The company has already signed a deal with the California Department of Corrections to track the movements of parolees using Digital Angel,” an existing device currently being tested at several correction facilities. Time magazine also cites Dr. Richard Seelig, the medical director of Applied Digital, who foresees that the device could function as a theft-proof, counterfeith-proof ID, like having a driver’s license that is tamper-proof and impossible to counterfeit, believes that airline pilots ought to be required by the government or by the airlines to have such chips. He believes that “security is the name of the game,” and believes that everyone who has yet to see the VeriChip镶嵌 in someone should see it before September 11th.

Compromising the privacy of parolees might not clinch a great deal of public sympathy, so it is not surprising that this group of people will likely be the first to have the VeriChip implanted. Then, perhaps the chips could be implanted into certain other convicted criminals to monitor their movements, for example, into people who are monitoring persons. The authorities could be alerted whenever they are too near a school. Once we accept the idea of employing the “Lojack” noise is in the tent for nonvoluntary applications of this technology.

The VeriChip’s potential for real abuse of basic civil liberties, and for concentrating unprecedented power over individuals in the hands of a few, is both real and deeply troubling. Christians and other concerned individuals have long been aware of the technological potential that is at stake. What if someone was just going for a walk and an interrogator turned up? What would happen if the interrogator menaced and forced the person to give up the chip and its information, even though the person was innocent? The VeriChip could be used to enhance the situation, to enhance the ability of government and law enforcement to surveil people. The device could be used to track people, even to the extent of identifying them, even on a particularly sensitive level. The device could be used to track people, even to the extent of identifying them, even on a particularly sensitive level.

In the future, we may indeed find that without the VeriChip, it is difficult or impossible to conduct the most basic economic transactions. What if all transactions were to be conducted on a computer identification chip and every bank and credit card transaction were to be open to invasive scrutiny and real-time surveillance, ushering in a new form of policing? There will literally be nowhere to hide. George Orwell himself could not have envisioned a more sinister scenario.
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What if someday a computer identification chip—a chip able to contain any information storable in a digital form—were to be implanted into your body? Your identity, personal medical records, and other important information would be with you wherever you go, adding a level of convenience that would make the ATM card look like yesterday’s technology. What if that chip could monitor your vital signs and be used by others to locate you, using global positioning satellite technology, no matter where you might be? With this chip, you would, technically speaking, be a cyborg: part human, part machine. Would you welcome such a chip, or would you see it as a serious threat to your privacy and a potential tool of intrusive businesses and oppressive governments?

Such a chip is not a futuristic invention, but is here now and nearly ready to be used. It is the VeriChip, and its designer, Applied Digital Solutions of Florida, is seeking approval from the Food and Drug Administration to begin putting it to use. Its motto is “Get Chipped!” and it is reported that at least 2,500 people have already implanted the chip purely out of curiosity and desire to do so. The device, about the size of a grain of rice, is injected under the skin through a needle and will respond to special handheld scanners. Applied Digital has a number of positive uses in mind for the chip, including the provision of medical information for people who become unconscious and the identification of lost Alzheimer’s patients. The device could also be used along with tracking equipment to help locate lost or kidnapped people, kind of like a “LoJack” for humans (the LoJack is an electronic tracking device used to retrieve stolen automobiles).

Those who have a strong suspicion of technology in that it might be used to limit liberty and remove privacy will be concerned about this device. Anyone who has read the dystopian novels as frightening as Fahrenheit 451, 1984, or Brave New World will likely be chilled by the announcement of the VeriChip. In addition, concerns have been raised regarding end-time prophecy by those wondering whether the chip could be the equivalent of the “mark of the beast” spoken about in Revelation. According to the Associated Press, Applied Digital has consulted with various theologians and subsequently assured people that the chip doesn’t fit the biblical description of the mark because it is not an “inviolate” tool for tracking. The chip raises very serious questions of ethics and public policy, particularly in the areas of invasion of privacy and surveillance—areas in which there is substantial literature in moral philosophy and political science. Privacy results from the freedom of access personal information about another on demand gives individual power over the great power that holds and sells our secrets. In this article, I will try to convince readers that the device “could function as a theft-proof, counterfeit-proof ID, having a driver’s license number on it, your name, your image, and believing that even King David, the “man after God’s own heart,” could not resist. What is an appropriate ethical assessment of the VeriChip? Does it represent a serious threat to our privacy, to our ability to control the information we give out or to protect the privacy of medical records? Medical ethicists have been concerned to protect medical confidentiality, including the privacy of patient data. Medical confidentiality is important for a number of reasons which are well documented in the literature. One is that the threat of inappropriate disclosure of patient information will have consequences for the doctors and patients that will be detrimental to the practice of medicine. The other is because of increased public awareness of the need for better patient care. The raising of serious questions of privacy and surveillance—areas in which there is substantial

concern over the use of the VeriChip by employers, the government, and other organizations. However, I believe that does in fact constitute a serious threat, and that once it is accepted, it will find an ever-expanding market for continually expanding uses.

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While Applied Digital’s Chief Technology Officer and Vice President Keith Bolton has stated that the “chip will be used for identification purposes only—never for surveillance,” and has promised that the data will be stored in a secure and confidential manner, many are suspicious of such assurances. While Applied Digital’s primary market may indeed be the health care field, the chip could have uses in other areas as well. The chip could be used for security purposes in places such as banks, airports, and prisons, or even for personal use, such as a “feit-proof ID, like having a driver’s license number on it, your name, your image, and believing that even King David, the “man after God’s own heart,” could not resist. What is an appropriate ethical assessment of the VeriChip? Does it represent a serious threat to our privacy, to our ability to control the information we give out or to protect the privacy of medical records? Medical ethicists have been concerned to protect medical confidentiality, including the privacy of patient data. Medical confidentiality is important for a number of reasons which are well documented in the literature. One is that the threat of inappropriate disclosure of patient information will have consequences for the doctors and patients that will be detrimental to the practice of medicine. The other is because of increased public awareness of the need for better patient care.

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In the future, we may indeed find that without the VeriChip, it is difficult or impossible to control the most basic economic and social decisions of our society. Many people will be open to invasive scrutiny and real-time surveillance, ushering in a new form of the surveillance society. There will likely be nowhere to hide. George Orwell himself could not have envisioned a more sinister scenario.