

Health-care chips could get under your skin

June 12 2006

It seems like something out of an X Files script - a person's health-care information encoded into a tiny chip and implanted beneath the skin - but it's no script, says one health ethicist.

"No, it's not conspiracy theorist. This is a proposal that hospitals have put forward. There's a company that supplies implantable chips that would be used for a patient if they were unconscious, which would link to their medical record in a way that would allow them to be treated without anyone being there to tell the doctors what was wrong," said Dr. Ian Kerr. "It's like a MedicAlert bracelet on steroids."

Kerr, a University of Alberta alumnus who is now the Canada Research Chair in Ethics, Law and Technology, University of Ottawa, Faculty of Law, spoke to delegates at the Access and Privacy Conference 2006: Sharing New Perspectives. The conference, which was sponsored by the U of A Faculty of Extension and ran June 7-9, is an annual international event bringing together Canada's foremost information rights experts. The Information Commissioner of Canada, Hon. John M. Reid, and privacy commissioner of Alberta, Frank Work, spoke at the conference, as well as Mexican commissioner Juan-Pablo Guerrero from the Instituto Federal Acceso a la Información Pública, and senior lecturer Rick Snell from the University of Tasmania.

Since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved VeriChip as a medical device in October of 2004, 232 doctors in 80 hospitals have elected to use the implantable VeriMed Patient Identification system as a means of linking patients to electronic health care records, said Kerr.

Although Canada's Therapeutic Products Directorate has not yet approved the implantable Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology for use in Canada, the VeriChip corporation has recently opened offices in Vancouver and Ottawa.

"Without question, there will always be legitimate and convenient uses for this kind of technology," said Kerr. "But what we have to worry about are the same kind of problems we're currently having on the Internet, with credit card and identity theft. A chip could be sending information about my heart rate to my physician, but it could be intercepted by the police."

The current technology isn't exactly secure, either, said Kerr.

"What's useful to know about the VeriChip is that it's not encrypted, it's not secure. It can be cloned," he said. "And yet, there are people who are voluntarily signing up for these things and they don't really have a sense of what kind of information they're allowing to leak out. Leave the futuristic stuff aside, when you start talking about all this information on the database that's accessible through a cloned VeriChip, which is very easy to do, it becomes a really important question whether to regulate these in Canada."

A cloned chip could give criminals access to your health insurance or your medical files, said Kerr. A changed medical record could mean someone no longer qualifies for health insurance or put someone's health at risk. "For example if someone got into my health-care record they could take out the fact that I am deathly allergic to peanuts."

Kerr's main concern with the VeriChip, however, is that no one seems quite sure who should be in charge of regulating it. While some hospitals in the U.S. have implanted the chips, some people in Canada seem to be looking at the device like an extreme form of body piercing.

"My concern, first of all, is whether or not the chip is even playing the role of a medical device," he said, comparing it again to a MedicAlert bracelet. "That bracelet might save somebody's life, but it's not a medical device. It's something which is an identifier that can be applied in a way that has a good medical outcome, but it's not like a scalpel."

Without knowing who regulates these high-tech medical records, there's no way to determine who has the key to the filing cabinet, said Kerr.

"So, the preliminary questions are about who really should be regulating this anyway? We're at a very interesting stage because what we're starting to see is a merger between the health field and the information technology field," he said. "So, is this something that a doctor does or has access to or something that the IT person has access to?"

Kerr said he doesn't necessarily have any answers, but he'd like to see governments searching for some before giving new technology the go-ahead.

"It's not that I have any particular prescriptions, but what I want to do here is say let's not rush into this without recognizing the broad range of issues."

Source: By Ileiren Byles, University of Alberta

Citation: Health-care chips could get under your skin (2006, June 12) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2006-06-health-care-chips-skin.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.