

Bill banning forced identity-chip implants clears House

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Invasion of privacy is an issue that really gets under State Rep. Babette Josephs' skin.

That's why the Philadelphia Democrat introduced a bill, passed unanimously last week by the House, that would ban the forced implantation of computer chips in humans.

Conjuring Orwellian images, Josephs worries the identification devices – the size of a grain of rice – could lead to a real-life Big Brother nightmare.

"I'm doing, I think, what the legislature does too little of," she said. "This is a problem on the horizon, and I want to address it before it becomes a societal disgrace."

Though the technology hasn't debuted in Pennsylvania, VeriChip, a company in Florida, received federal Food and Drug Administration clearance in 2004 to market the implanted microchips, which were tested on 200 Alzheimer's patients.

Injected into the triceps, the chips have unique 16-digit codes and GPS capabilities that allow nursing homes to find wandering patients.

"I think it's really horrible that we want to chip them like barcoded packages of meat," said Kim Sultzbaugh, a research specialist who helped Josephs write the bill.

California, North Dakota, and Wisconsin have enacted laws similar to the ban Josephs is proposing.

The technology can also be used for security, as in a widely reported case in Mexico. There, the implants were required for some government employees to enter restricted buildings.

A bar in Scotland even offers to implant patrons with chips that allow them to purchase pints without a credit card, according to news accounts.

Despite the technology's potential usefulness, Sultzbaugh said, some Christian groups liken the identification devices to the "mark of the beast," a Satanic mark described in the Book of Revelation and represented by the number 666.

Josephs said electronic ankle bracelets could keep track of someone in a less-invasive manner.

But for some "murderers, killers, and rapists," ankle bracelets won't do the trick, said State Rep. Dan Moul (R., Adams).

Moul amended Josephs' bill to allow chips to be implanted by court order. The bill also would allow the chips to be implanted in Guantanamo Bay detainees who end up in Pennsylvania.

"Terrorists could take that ankle bracelet off with a saw and strap it to a dog and let them run around," Moul said. "We need to know if these people are returning to the war to fight against America."

Josephs called Moul's changes "inflammatory" and "sensational" and hopes the Senate throws them out when it considers the measure.

Erik Arneson, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R., Delaware), said the bill was not scheduled for immediate action.

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