

FDA approves medical microchip for human use

Critics: Confidentiality could be compromised

By Diedtra Henderson
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration yesterday approved an implantable computer chip that can pass a patient's medical details to doctors, speeding care.

But critics warn that it could open new ways to imperil the confidentiality of medical records.

The FDA said yesterday that Applied Digital Solutions of Delray Beach, Fla., could market the VeriChip, an implantable computer chip about the size of a grain of rice, for medical purposes. It's the first time the government has approved use of the device for medical purposes, although it has seen limited use in Mexico.

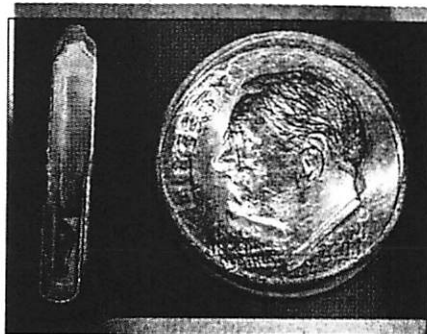
With the pinch of a syringe, the microchip is inserted under the skin in a procedure that takes less than 20 minutes and leaves no stitches. Silently and invisibly, the dormant chip stores a code that releases patient-specific information — such as patient allergies and prior treatments — when a scanner passes over it.

The microchips have already been implanted in 1 million pets. But the chip's possible dual use for tracking people's movements — as well as speeding delivery of their medical information to emergency rooms — has raised alarm.

"If privacy protections aren't built in at the outset, there could be harmful consequences for patients," said Emily Stewart, a policy analyst at the Health Privacy Project.

To protect patient privacy, the devices should reveal only vital medical information, like blood type and allergic reactions, needed for health-care workers to do their jobs, Stewart said.

An information technology guru at Detroit Medical Center, however, sees



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The "Verichip," shown with a dime for comparison, can be implanted in about 20 minutes. It yields data to a scanner.

the benefits of the devices and will lobby for his center's inclusion in a VeriChip pilot program.

"One of the big problems in health care has been the medical records situation. So much of it is still on paper," said David Ellis, the center's chief futurist and co-founder of the Michigan Electronic Medical Records Initiative.

As "medically mobile" patients visit specialists for care, their records fragment on computer systems that don't talk to each other.

"It's part of the future of medicine to have these kinds of technologies that make life simpler for the patient," Ellis said. Pushing for the strongest encryption algorithms to ensure hackers can't nab medical data as information transfers from chip to reader to secure database will help address privacy concerns, he said.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services yesterday announced \$139 million in grants to help make real President Bush's push for electronic health records for most Americans within a decade.

Applied Digital gave away scanners to a few hundred animal shelters and veterinary clinics when it first entered the pet market 15 years ago. Now, 50,000 such scanners have been sold.

To kick-start the chip's use among humans, Applied Digital will provide \$650 scanners for free at 200 of the nation's trauma centers.