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High Tech, Under the Skin

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"The physical reality of the chip in the body is no big deal," said Amal Graafstra, who in March 2005 became the first known person to independently have himself implanted with a chip by having a surgeon friend place it in his hand. "But the symbolism of the tag is much more of a big deal as a social marker."

Mr. Graafstra, along with Mr. Donelson and his friends, consider themselves part of an informal underground of implanters, self-styled "midnight engineers" who are dedicated to designing applications for their chips and exploring the philosophical implications. They buy cheap RFID chips on the Internet for as little as \$2 and wire scanners to their computers, car doors and other devices to exploit the technology.

Mr. Graafstra, 29, the owner of a mobile technology company in Bellingham, Wash., has an implant in each hand, which he uses to get in the front door of his home, unlock his computer and occasionally get into his car. He has written a book, "RFID Toys: 11 Cool Projects for Home, Office and Entertainment," to be published this month by Wiley.

His girlfriend, Jennifer Tomblin, a 23-year-old marketing student, thought Mr. Graafstra's hobby was odd at first. But over time she became convinced of their usefulness. She got an implant in December.

"I like not having to fumble for keys when I'm coming in with groceries and everything, you just lean up against the door, and it opens," she said.

Certainly RFID implants have their detractors.

"We have to look down the road and think more than about how cool it is today," said Liz McIntyre co-author of "Spychips: How Major Corporations and Government Plan to Track Your Every Move with RFID."

"We have to look at how it may be ushering in a society in which we are all numbered in the future," she said. "Maybe stores would require us to scan our hands or an insurance company says unless you have this chip we can't insure you."

Other objections to implanting chips include the safety of procedures done in nonmedical settings.

Some doctors have done the procedures in people's homes, and others have implanted chips in their offices after patients signed forms acknowledging that long-term studies have not been done on their safety. Piercers treat the implants much like any other procedure, instructing people to keep the site dry to avoid infection and advising them that swelling and redness should last a week.

On Web forums some people profess to have implanted themselves with an injector gun used for animals, but the consensus among others is that doing so is dangerous.

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Christian Rigby, 31, who runs a Internet forum for people independently "tagged" (tagged.kaos.gen.nz) describes the forum as a resource for those interested in sharing experiences and technology. "You get to be a part of a leading technology which is, at the heart of it, what all geeks really want to do," he said.

The circle may be widening as implants intrigue a growing number of people. Mr. Rigby's Internet forum had 2,278 hits in December. As of mid-January, it had 1.1 million for the month.

Another spur to recent interest is a video posted on the Internet (www.electric-clothing.com/chipped.html) by Mikey Sklar of his implant procedure in November, performed by a surgeon friend in New York City. Mr. Sklar, 28, formerly a Unix engineer at an investment bank, said that because the hardware is relatively inexpensive, small and technical, college students will pick it up. "Freshman students will modify their dorms with RFID readers," he predicted. "That's where the growth is going to be."

At least one supplier of RFID chips, Matt Trossen, owner of PhidgetsUSA in Westchester, Ill., is skeptical about the ultimate appeal of implants. "Think about how many people have never gotten their ears pierced," he said. "A lot of people just don't want to stick themselves."

Mr. Trossen sells his chips to people who use them for education and robotics and his Web site includes a disclaimer stating that the company does not advise consumers to implant them in humans or animals because the tags are not sold as medical products and are not sanitized.

He said that one could use an RFID chip just as easily for turning on computers and opening doors by putting it on a key chain or card. Although he could see a day when society would deem it acceptable for babies to be tagged at birth with chips bearing their Social Security number, now the technology for making the chips useful for home applications is beyond most people's reach.

"For a kid to say, 'Mom and Dad I need this implant,' " Mr. Trossen said, "it would be like me running out and buying an atom collider. It is a nice conversation piece, but I can't really use it."

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