

Laguna Honda Hospital to track patients and staff using RFID technology, violating privacy

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When Laguna Honda Hospital (LHH) finally opens its replacement facilities in December (or later in 2011), it will ostensibly be able to track patient and staff movements using RFID technology, potentially violating privacy concerns.

Thank God for Google's "alert" system. In the absence of any public hearings, we now we learn from a Google alert that LHH is implementing a tracking system that worries privacy advocates.

Big Brother appears to be watching.

Only in San Francisco would we permit tracking hospitalized patients and staff, but not the books library patrons have checked out. Maybe that's what "institutionalization" means.

Grandma may not have to worry so much about being run over by a Reindeer when LHH's new facilities open, since a Wi-Fi "Radio Frequency Identification Device" (RFID) system will be able to track her every move.

The system apparently relies on both "passive" and "active" radio frequency technology, and on global positioning technologies. These technologies use tiny computer chips integrated into tags that hold and transmit data, along with antennas that pick up the radio-frequency data.

If Grandma decides to leave the hospital's campus, LHH's Cisco Systems unified wireless network — which is thought to be linked to San Francisco's computer network infrastructure, or soon will be — may be able to find Grandma in the future at city bus stops and train stations, or wherever San Francisco's wireless network will be able to pick up signals from Grandma's ID badge.

At best, the tracking system may head off a head-on collision with Grandma's reindeer.

According to one Google alert last week, AeroScout is implementing three modules — its so-called "patient safety," "staff safety," and "asset tracking" systems — in LHH's replacement facilities.

They claim it is to monitor patients with cognitive impairments, such as Alzheimer's patients, but LHH has roughly only 100 patients at risk of elopement. Many dementia patients aren't even at risk of elopement.

Ostensibly, the system was also developed to track the one or two EKG machines at LHH, an unknown number of portable x-ray machines, 12 to 24 "crash carts," and other portable "diagnostic equipment" not bolted to the floor — which bolted equipment is in no danger of "sprouting legs" and disappearing from the facility.

The system's main advocate may be LHH's former Chief of Psychiatry, Charles Stinson, who now practices as an MD specializing in psychiatric care only 50 percent of the time; the rest of his time is spent as a "Chief Medical Informatics Officer," for which he may or may not hold a college degree.

For all we know, it may be that "social rehabilitation" patients who enter into psychosocial "contracts" may need to have their movements tracked, and that's why the program was expanded to all of LHH's 780 patients.

A public records request revealed last Friday that the sales quote for the AeroScout system will cost, initially, \$1,411,405. Annual maintenance costs are initially estimated at approximately \$145,000, at minimum.



A U.S. Senator has called RFID's "barcodes on steroids," worried about micro monitoring.

The contract calls for a 10,000-tag license pack (at \$154,000), 3,000 “T2 tags” for equipment and presumably patients (at \$107,000), 800 “heavy duty wrist straps,” 3,000 tag mounting cradles, 6,000 tie wraps, 1,000 pairs of Velcro attachments — and 1,400 “T3 tags” (at \$51,982) presumably for LHH’s 1,400-member staff.

The T-3 tags, according to AeroScout’s web site, feature staff photos and a barcode. The T-2 tags are also thought to be able to provide patient photos, and may contain a reprogrammable barcode.

As well, 130 “rugged location receivers” and pole mounts account for nearly \$200,000 of the project cost. It is not known whether LHH’s neighbors have been advised that 130 new Wi-Fi “location” receivers will apparently be installed on LHH’s campus.

AeroScout’s web site indicates the “T3 tags” are “ideal for people tracking and for use as an ‘ID badge’ for personnel or visitors.” The T3 tags are tamper-proof; the system will automatically send an alert if the tag is “removed from its host.”

One wonders whether labor unions have notified their union members that they will soon be wearing ID cards that can track staff movements throughout the facility. Most staff have no idea LHH plans to incorporate tracking chips into their ID badges.

It’s not known whether the T2 tags for patients and equipment, or the heavy-duty wrist straps, are similarly tamper proof, sending an automatic alert if the tags are removed.

One press release indicated patients will wear AeroScout wristband tags, which allow hospital staff to determine each patient’s location in “real time.” The wristband tags will be tied to photos to “help caregivers identify the person in need of assistance.”

Another press release — timed to the Center for Health Design’s “Pebble Project partner” meeting held in San Francisco last week — announced this “patient safety” solution. One aspect of the Pebbles Project with LHH is thought to involve analyzing whether the new facility will improve patient quality of life by assessing patient movement throughout the new buildings.

LHH’s proposed ID tag system may involve patient “profiling,” which is defined as the reconstruction of a person’s movements or transactions over a specific period of time, and which may violate a person’s private affairs. The Pebbles Project couldn’t be prouder, despite potential infringement of patient’s privacy.

Although Laguna Honda Hospital likes to claims its residents, along with their families and loved ones, are active participants in the decisions that affect their care, the patient and staff tracking ID system may not have been vetted with residents or their families prior to a decision being made to implement the tracking system.

Indeed, there have been no public hearings on whether to implement RFID tracking of patients at LHH, unlike the public hearings held in 2004 about implementing RFID technology to check out books at San Francisco’s public libraries, which plan was eventually rejected by San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors over privacy concerns.

Why would RFID technology not be OK to check out books, but be OK to track the movement of patients and staff at Laguna Honda Hospital?

Originally LHH planned a patient tracking system only for approximately 100 patients who had wander guards and were considered at risk of elopement from the facility. But a decision appears to have been made by LHH’s nursing staff to electronically “tag” all residents, regardless of whether they had cognitive impairments placing them at risk of wandering unsafely throughout the campus, or off campus.

Although patients will theoretically be allowed to refuse to wear the ID tags, many of their devices — including wheelchairs, specialized seating cushions, and other items — may be tagged, with or without their consent. Also theoretically, each patient may have several RFID tags simultaneously — one on their wrist bands, another on their wheelchair, another on their bed, and another on their seating cushions.



RFID's pose great danger for patient privacy, since insurance companies may be able to access data.

Then there's the issue of "informed consent." Will patients be fully informed that the ID tags will be capable of tracking their locations and movement throughout the facility? And will patients and their families fully understand that the tags will track their patterns of movement over time?

Few of LHH's staff appear to understand how extreme an invasion of privacy the ID tags will be for themselves, let alone how intrusive it may potentially be for their patients, particularly patients who are NOT at risk of elopement or wandering.

LHH's staff who may be aware of the RFID plan may be too frightened about keeping their jobs to speak up publically about potential invasion of privacy concerns. Staff too frightened to speak up with opposing views may prevent critical thinking of management decisions.

A Bay Area school using RFID technology with small children raised a ruckus among parents and observers who felt it was an invasion of privacy, despite the good intentions.

San Francisco's Board of Supervisors rejected in 2004 a proposal to use RFID technology to check out books at San Francisco's public libraries.

According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, RFID systems create three problems for personal privacy. First, they're promiscuous, in that they can talk to any compatible tag or card reader system. Second, they're stealthy, since patients and staff won't know when the tags are transmitting information. Third, they're readable remotely.

In March 2004, U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy, worried about RFID challenges to privacy and security, called RFID's "barcodes on steroids," warning that they herald an age of "micro monitoring."

For that matter, insurance companies may take a keen interest in where patients go, which the RFID system will be able to provide to insurers.

If I were Grandma, and had a choice of which facility to enter for long-term care using private insurance or Medicare Part A coverage, I might choose to enter a facility that doesn't track my every move.

After all, the government has no business knowing where Grandma may be at very moment of the day.

How did we go from *not* tracking library patrons and the books they check out, to tracking each patient's moves at Laguna Honda Hospital?

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Where's the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California? Do they know about LHH's plans?