Australia's Big Brother Card: 

Coming your way!

By Meryl Dorey

In the 1980's when it was originally proposed to introduce an Australia Card that would give each citizen a number, people were up in arms. They felt, and rightly so, that this would be a gross invasion of privacy and rejected the notion of this sort of government interference quite firmly. At that time, the Health Insurance Commission, which was to administer the Australia Card, stated that, "It will be important to minimize any adverse public reaction to implementation of the system. One possibility would be to use a staged approach for implementation, whereby only less sensitive data are held in the system initially with the facility to input additional data at a later stage when public acceptance may be forthcoming more readily."

That later stage is now! A reliable source in Federal Parliament has informed the AVN that legislation is now pending to provide every Australian man, woman and child with a Health Smart Card. The government intends to pass this legislation before the Christmas break this year.

What is a Smart Card, Anyway?

A smart card is basically a credit card sized card using an integrated microprocessor which can store an incredible amount of personal identifying information. What separates a smart card from the standard magnetic swipe card (like the present Medicare Card or a charge card), is the amount of information that it can hold and the use to which it will ultimately be put. The smart card has the potential to store sensitive data about the individual and there are no guarantees that this data will be either kept private or used for the purposes to which we have been told they will be put - whatever those purposes are, we have not yet been told.

How will they work?

There are two types of technology available for smart cards; contact and contactless.

With contact cards, the magnetic strip on the back of the card is swiped over a card reader which reads the information and identifies the card holder. The sorts of information that can be contained on a smart card are almost limitless. They can tell who you are, where you live, when you were at the doctor or hospital last, how many children you have, what your income and profession are, whether or not your children are vaccinated, what medications you are on, etc.

The contactless card contains the same information, but rather than having to swipe the card over a reader, this information can be accessed from a distance. Short range cards cannot operate over distances much longer than a millimetre or so. The long range cards however, use radio signals to operate and their maximum range is much greater. Certain cities such as Hong Kong, Washington D.C., and Manchester, England have trialled the use of these longer-range, contactless smart cards for mass transit purposes.

Imagine the implications of such a card being used by you and your family. What is to prevent smart card readers being placed in doorways of supermarkets, shopping centres and the like to gather information on you
and your family – your habits and your movements.

What about privacy?

The legislation to ensure that your privacy will be protected with the use of these cards is woefully inadequate. There is no constitutional right of privacy in Australia as there would be in other countries including the US. Our only protection is from the Privacy Act of 1988 which was so badly emasculated before its passage as to be almost useless. For a detailed analysis of this act and the privacy implications of health smart cards and other computerised tracking devices, please read the excellent study by Roger Clark, visiting fellow in Computer Technology at the Australian National University. The Australian Privacy Act 1988 as an Implementation of the OECD Data Protection Guidelines can be found at http://www.anu.edu.au/people/Roger.Clarke/DV/Popular.html

Consider these possibilities: you go into a Medicare office to file a claim after visiting a doctor. The operator behind the counter will pass your smart card before a reader and be able to bring up your complete medical history. Did you have a sexually transmitted disease at one point in your life? They will know it. Have you ever had treatment for the use of illicit drugs? They will know it! Are your children unvaccinated? They will know it!

Picture this scenario. Your child is playing in the back yard. They trip and fall over, giving themselves a nasty cut. You feel that it may need stitching so you rush them into the local hospital. The hospital asks for your smart card – just like they used to ask for your medicare card. Passing it over the reader, they check your child's vaccination status and discover that they are not vaccinated or that their vaccinations are not up to date. What will happen then, do you think? Will the doctor come out with all guns blazing to condemn you for being an ignorant and abusive parent? Will the Department of Family Services be contacted to check up on your family life since anyone who does not vaccinate must be a child abuser (don't scoff - this has already happened to at least one family in Australia that we know of!).

Another possible scenario is that you are applying for a job and are asked to present your health smart card to the company's human resources department along with your application. The department head checks out your past and finds that you have a recessive gene which makes it more likely that you will develop diabetes or a heart condition in the future. He also sees that you have had several illnesses in the last two years and decides from looking at this, that you will be a poor risk as an employee. If he draws that conclusion, you can bet that most other employers will also. Say goodbye to employment and hello to the dole!

Injected Chips?

To me, the scariest thing about the health smart card, is that it is only the beginning. The next and most logical step is the use of microchips which will contain all of the same information contained on smart cards but which will be injected into us and read and updated from a distance.

Now, before you start to think that this would never happen and that it's all a bit too much like science fiction, be aware that as of January 1999, the NSW State Government has mandated that all domestic animals be injected with a microchip which would identify them. Pet owners don't have a choice - they must do this by law or face fines.

And how are these chips being put into the family dog or cat? Why, through their vaccines, of course. These microscopic chips are nothing more than contactless health smart cards.
How long will it be before you or your child receive this "gift" from the government? They will sell it to us as a gift too. You will no longer have to worry about robbery because nobody will be carrying cash – this chip will contain your bank details so you can pass your hand over a reader and have the amount of your purchase automatically deducted from your account. Your child will never have to worry about getting lost because they will have an indelible identification mark which would have been inserted at birth. It’s all so exciting, don’t you think?

**Where are we starting to see these cards?**

The insidious thing is that we are starting to see these cards being used in schools. This has occurred with the introduction of the Munchiecard in South Australian school canteens.

"Munchiecard™ is a smartcard that has been developed for schools by the Children’s Health Development Foundation, of the Women’s and Children’s Hospital, Adelaide, South Australia.

...Using the card will give school children the opportunity to experience the application of advanced technology that will be part of their future. *(ed note - our children are being prepared for what is assumed to be the inevitable invasion of technology into their lives)*

Q. Are there any records kept of transactions using Munchiecard?
A. Each card has an identifying number. Your school may wish to record the card number issued to each child, so they can be returned to the owner if found. There is no other information involved. Its just like using cash.

**So, why do we need these smart cards?**

The rationale behind the use of a health smart card is the same as that behind the original Australia Card, namely:

- To provide a central register which would contain information about those members of the population who were registered.
- To use a unique identifying number or code for each individual who is registered.
- A unique, multi-purpose card would be issued by the Health Insurance Commission.
- The obligation would be on the individual to produce the card when dealing with financial transactions, social security, and taxation, all employers and financial institutions, hospitals, real estate agents and produce agents.
- Obligations will be inherent on organisations to demand the card and apply sanctions to people who fail to produce it.
- The card will be used as a local and international identifier.

**What may happen next?**

Dr. Roger Clark has written extensively on the methods available for what he calls dataveillance (a combination of data and surveillance) and about the role of the health smart card in this procedure. He says that, "Of especial concern is the threat to personal privacy that the general-purpose use of an inhabitant registrant scheme represents. It is speculated that, where such schemes are pursued energetically, the reaction may be strong enough to threaten the social fabric."

Whether or not that proves to be the case, there is no doubt that the government is pushing ahead with their attempts to track and classify all of us - and our children to.

What are you going to do about it? You can sit back and let it happen, or you can raise your voice up and say that enough is enough and you and your family are entitled to the basic privacy that everyone in a democratic society deserves.

Say no to smart cards by writing to your local federal member of parliament. Call the Serjeant at Arm’s Office (House of Representatives) and the Office of the Black Rod (Senate) on 02 6277 7111. Ask to get the contact information for all Senators and Members of Parliament which they will be happy to send to you. Then, you will have easy access to who you need to address your letter to. Ask your member to forward a copy of your letter to the Minister and Shadow Minister for Social Security.

**Contact the Privacy Committee, Level 8, Goodsell Building, 8 - 12 Chifley Square, SYDNEY NSW 2000, 02**
9228 8199 (phone) 02 9288 8187 (FAX); send a copy of your letter to Ms. Moira Scollay, Privacy Commissioner’s Office, GPO Box 5218 SYDNEY NSW 1042 Hotline - 1300 363 992 (toll free) Fax - (02) 9284 9666 http://www.privacy.gov.au.

In your letter, explain that you are most concerned about any attempts to use a health smart card. That you fear that this will mean a loss of your privacy and that you will refuse to use one and you want to know what the privacy commissioner is going to do about this situation.

You must act now – there is no other way.