

Families' reactions mixed on chip implants for disabled

By Emily Berry Staff Writer, STAFF WRITER

Some parents of Orange Grove Center clients said that implanting their children with an identification microchip would make them feel more secure about the children's safety.

But one family member of an Orange Grove client said she did not like the idea of putting implants in developmentally disabled people.

"They're not guinea pigs, they're people," Tammie Howard said.

Ms. Howard said her 54-year-old disabled sister lives in a group home and has been an Orange Grove Center client for many years. Orange Grove Center is considering a joint venture with VeriChip Corp. to implant microchips in 100 of the center's clients, said Dr. Rick Rader, a center director. The device would contain information that would identify clients and allow medical providers to access their medical records, officials said.

Dr. Rader said that if the center participates with VeriChip, which makes the VeriMed implant device, it would be to determine the usefulness of the microchip and if it would benefit Orange Grove clients.

The implant was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2004, he said.

Dr. Rader and Dr. Richard Seelig, VeriChip vice president, spoke to about 20 parents, board members and others at the center Friday.

"We're not studying anything," Dr. Rader said.

Dan LaGraff, an Orange Grove Center parent, said an implant for his son would give him peace of mind. He said his son, Jordan, is disabled and nonverbal.

"When he gets a chance to take off, he takes off," he said.

Mr. LaGraff said the implanted chip would help because his son would tear off a medical identification

bracelet.

Sherry Campbell and Sharon Matthews, each of whom has a son who uses a wheelchair, attended Dr. Seelig's presentation.

Each said her son has medical conditions that make quick access to their medical history critical.

"My biggest nightmare is when I go to the hospital and they say, 'What's his medical history?'" Ms. Campbell said.

Ms. Howard, who did not attend the meeting, questioned the need for such a device. She said Orange Grove staff members always give careful supervision to her sister.

"They've never lost track of her," she said.

Hal Baker, Orange Grove deputy director, said the center will host more discussions about the potential benefits and drawbacks of cooperating with VeriChip.

"We will pursue it as necessary — or not," he said. "It will be an individual choice."

Officials said for the implants to be useful, area hospitals must agree to scan for the devices and train their staff members to deal with them.

On Thursday, Dr. Seelig discussed the device with some of Erlanger hospital's staff and met some members of the hospital's ethics committee.

The hospital's Institutional Review Board was invited to meet with Dr. Seelig, but the meeting was informal, Erlanger spokeswoman Nancy White said.

Dr. Ronald Blankenbaker, associate dean of the University of Tennessee Medical College's Chattanooga Unit, said the review board would have no role in determining whether Erlanger would cooperate, as the implant has FDA approval.

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