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GENETIC PATDOWN

Homeland Security plan for DNA screening could quickly lead to other uses, abuses

By Katie Drummond

Airport scanners already get under your clothes, but federal officials aren't stopping there: They want to get inside your genes, too.

This summer, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security plans to begin testing a portable DNA scanner, The Daily has learned.

The device, which has not yet been unveiled but reportedly resembles a desktop printer, is expected to make genetic tests far more common, particularly in matters related to refugees, human trafficking and immigration. As the technology is commercialized, some experts believe it will soon make its way into everyday medical and law enforcement situations.

With nothing more than a swab of

saliva, security officials can use the device to obtain genetic intel in less than an hour. The results reveal personal details about one's ethnicity, race and lineage. Current DNA tests can take several weeks.

"This can be done in real time, with no technical expertise," Richard Selden, the executive chairman of NetBio, the company that devised the scanners, told The Daily. "DNA information has the potential to become part of the fabric of day-to-day life, and this facilitates that process."

The machine also cuts the cost of a single DNA test from \$500 to under \$100, Christopher Miles, the biometrics program manager in the DHS Office of Science and Technology, said at a conference last week on biometrics and security.

"It's the same process that occurs in the

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lab today," he said, according to NextGov, a site covering technology and government. But "it will drastically make the system more efficient."

Thousands of prospective American residents could soon encounter the screening device. Officials hope to combat human trafficking and illegal immigration by using DNA tests to confirm relationships among immigrating families and foreigners giving their children up for adoption.

But the device might also have myriad other applications. Pinpointing criminals and missing persons are also options for future use of the device, Miles said.

Jim Harper, the director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute and a member of the DHS privacy committee, called the technology a game-changer, and one that officials are rolling out too hastily.

"There's going to be a rapid migration into collecting more DNA from more people," he said. "We're plunging into the unknown here."

The DHS mandates a policy of supporting the commercialization of new technology. With the introduction of rapid DNA scanners in a federal setting, a new commercial marketplace for the devices is an inevitable result, Harper said.

Indeed, Selden told The Daily that the device can be tailored for emergency rooms, food safety tests and law enforcement, in addition to federal agencies. He anticipates commercialization within a year.

"This really is a platform technology," he said. "DHS wanted it for specific applications, but other settings might want a device for different portions of DNA."

Scanners used by the DHS will analyze only for a small quantity of identifying information, and won't detect genetic vulnerabilities related to health or behavior, Selden said. The agency notes that the field test will be small in scale, and there's not yet a timeline or decision on purchasing or deploying the technology.

"This is a simply a preliminary test of how the technology performs," DHS spokesman Chris Ortman told The Daily.

But even information collected under the current plans will pose problems, Miles acknowledged.

Unexpected paternity results, for example, would do more than thwart an immigrant family or an adoption.

In some cultures, it might raise life-or-death issues.

"Is it our role to tell them that?" he said, adding that DHS privacy and civil liberties officers are still answering such key questions.

Harper, for one, is concerned that the DHS didn't consult their privacy advisory committee, of which he is a member, as it prepared to test the scanners.

"I'm frustrated that I'm learning about this from a reporter," he said. "This is exactly the kind of thing our committee should be reviewing." ■

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— Jim Harper,
DHS privacy committee**

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