

Implanting doubt

Is microchipping really the safe and reliable way to get your pet home safely if he strays, is lost or stolen? And should it be made mandatory, as recent government proposals suggested? Promoters of this procedure say "Yes!", but there's more to it than meets the eye, as **Caroline Davis** investigates.



Far left: Prinnie suffered from a tumorous mass after being microchipped. Left: The wound resulting from the removal of Prinnie's tumour and microchip.

June heralds the seventh annual National Microchipping Month, organised by Petlog (the microchip database owned and managed by the Kennel Club) for pets. But before you rush out to take advantage of cut-price chipping, thinking you are being a responsible owner safeguarding your dog, take a moment to consider the implications and possible health risks of having your pet implanted with an RFID (radio frequency identification device) chip.

"PETS AT RISK"

While there are apparently millions of satisfied customers,

whose dogs have not displayed adverse reactions to microchipping to date, or who have had, happily, lost or stolen pets returned to them via their microchip details, there are some who are fighting vigorously against compulsory chipping for various reasons. These reasons include the perceived risk to pet health, and privacy concerns in that the collation of information has sinister connotations that will ultimately lead to the accepted and widespread chipping of humans.

There are certainly those, through first-hand experience of dealing with unpleasant, and sometimes fatal, aspects of adverse reactions to RFID

Microchipping is a controversial subject: it's advisable to inform yourself of the pros and cons of it so you can make an educated decision as to whether to have your pet chipped or not.

implants, who would never have dogs chipped again, nor recommend anyone else had their pets done either. One of those is Sarah Watson, who lives in Lincolnshire.

Sarah didn't consider the potential risks involved when she had her Border Collie bitch, Prinnie, microchipped – but has since dealt with the unfortunate consequences of doing so, comprising a tumour and chip removal. She says: "Vets don't inform you of the risks with microchipping. I had no warning of possible adverse reactions. I wasn't told that Prinnie would end up with a 20cm hole in her neck, a large lump of scar tissue and mental damage. She ended up being hospitalised for nine and a half weeks and I have been left with vet bills totalling over £5,500.

"When I complained to the manufacturer they denied their chip had caused the tumour, but still offered me £100 as a 'gesture of goodwill'. There was nothing in their microchip literature about risks or adverse reactions. If I had been informed [of these potential problems] prior to having Prinnie chipped, I would not have had her done. Pet owners need to be made aware of the risks."

When a vet removed Prinnie's tumour in December 2008, they

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found it to be half the size of a golf ball and that her microchip was connected to it.

Stresses Sarah: "It is unfair that we unknowingly put our pets at risk like this. Microchips are a good idea in theory, but they are not as safe as we like, or are told, to think. Please consider the risks before you have your pet chipped as there are other means of identification for them that are totally harmless."

Sarah Watson, however, isn't the only person to rue the day they had their pet microchipped...

"SOMETHING BAD GOING ON"

Another pet owner who recently experienced the results of an adverse reaction is Linda Hawkins from Tennessee, America. Linda's five-year-



Above: Scotty is suffering a terminal illness after a cancerous lump alongside his microchip was removed.

The wound resulting from Scotty's lump removal.



Besides microchipping there are other ways of identifying and tracing missing pets, such as a collar and ID tag and/or tattooing.

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sceptical that the chip had caused the cancer, since research has shown that vaccine injections [usually given in the same area as chip implants] in dogs and cats can lead to tumours. However, in the report from Antech Diagnostics, who performed testing on the tumour and confirmed cancer, the pathologist wrote that 'this inflammation is associated with other foreign debris, possibly from the microchip. The coating [used to help stop chips from migrating] could be the material inciting the inflammatory response.'

"Scotty won't live the 15 years he's supposed to; I did something I thought a responsible pet owner should – microchip your pet – and to think that it killed him. It just breaks your heart.

"I'll never have a dog microchipped again – if it became mandatory in my state I guess I'd have to move."

"I THOUGHT I WAS DOING RIGHT..."

Howard Gillis, from Virginia, America, until recently owned a beautiful Bullmastiff called Seamus. Howard had Seamus euthanised in February 2010 to stop his beloved pet suffering further from the aggressive cancer surrounding his two microchips. Seamus was just five years old.

Says Howard: "I had Seamus chipped when he was a year

chipped in case he got lost or stolen, and thought it was the best ID in case he went missing. The vet said it was a good idea and that there were never any bad reactions.

"The tumour occurred between Scotty's shoulder blades, where the chip had been implanted, and was the size of a small balloon when it was removed. It was described as a malignant lymphoma and the chip was embedded inside it. My vet was initially

Did you know?

- Microchips are larger than the grain of rice as stated by the companies that make and sell them. In fact, the size of chip doesn't alter whatever the size of dog it is implanted in. Says Lori Ginsberg, whose Chihuahua bled to death after being mandatorily microchipped last year: "It's comparable to inserting a Bic lighter into a tiny dog."
- The implanting needles used are considerably bigger than those used for vaccinations, and insertion

can go wrong if the animal moves or the needle is held at the wrong angle – as admitted by two researchers who regularly implant animals with microchips. ● As regards chipping being a relatively painless procedure, four Dutch vets were unanimous in May 2006 (as regards chipping horses) that they were against injecting micro transponders in horses because of (among other reasons) the 'painfulness of the procedure'.

old in case he was lost or stolen, choosing microchipping because I thought it was safe and had no implications to cause tumours. Never at any time were any cautions explained to me about implanted electronic devices in dogs causing cancerous tumours.

"My wife and I didn't know he was already chipped at six months of age when we bought him from a breeder in South Carolina – who had got him from another breeder in Texas – and she didn't tell us he was chipped. If we had been told he was already implanted we would never have had him done a second time. When we saw

"I found the adverse reporting procedure to be a farce – no one who should have been was interested."

Report a reaction

If you think your pet has had an adverse reaction to a microchip, or you've discovered the chip has migrated or failed, tell your vet who can then investigate and, if they deem it necessary, report this to the Microchip Advisory Group (MAG) whose administration is provided by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA). Inform your vet that the

adverse reaction form can be found on the BSAVA website at www.bsava.com and make a note of when you reported it and to whom. If you wish, follow up this request and ask if they did report it and when.

Independent reporting

In addition, also contact the independent adverse reaction reporting website www.chipmenot.org.uk (if

this is not live by the time this issue of **Dogs Monthly** is on sale, it soon will be) where you can report any concerns you have over the possibility of a chip affecting your dog's health, or if chips have failed or have migrated to another part of the body.

Your response is absolutely vital to ascertain the true status of whether microchips are affecting canine, and other animal, health or not.

our local newspaper advertise Humane Society microchipping for a small fee on a certain date and place we had Seamus chipped. On the day, he wasn't scanned to check if he already had a chip – they simply chipped him and gave me a paper with a number and said he was now registered with my name and address.

"A lump appeared when

Seamus was five at the site of the chip implant, between his shoulder blades. It was removed, necessitating a 12in-long incision to remove the 4lb 3oz [almost 2kg] tumour in September 2009, but another mass formed in December 2009/January 2010 and Seamus went downhill rapidly."

Howard was stunned when the vet who performed the

operation informed him that Seamus had two chips, and that one was in the centre of the tumour and the other was alongside it.

Dr Marta Vascellari (who has previously conducted research into lumps caused by chips) is currently writing a report about the case and this will determine whether Seamus's tumour was caused by his chips.



Campaigners against chipping and a legal expert say that responsible owners will comply with chipping, while irresponsible ones won't, which contradicts the notion that mandatory chipping will solve the problems of 'deliberate strays' and 'dangerous dogs'.

old Yorkshire Terrier, Scotty, is terminally ill due to a malignant tumour developing around his microchip implant three years after it was inserted in 2006. It was removed in December 2009. He is not expected to live another 12 months, despite ongoing chemotherapy and pain relief.

Linda was offered \$300 towards 'clinical costs' by the pet identification and recovery network HomeAgain that Scotty was registered with (who use

the Digital Angel chip); they denied the chip had caused a problem. To date, Scotty's medical bills are over \$4,000; it costs Linda \$900 a month for veterinary treatment for Scotty. Linda says she accepted the money to ease her financial burden but told **Dogs Monthly**: "I find it hard to believe that a company will just give away \$300 to somebody who calls in, unless there is something bad going on."

Continues Linda: "I had Scotty

Microchip info

There is much information available from charities and vets regarding the positives of microchipping, but the following websites provide details of other aspects you may wish to consider – before having your pet implanted, or agreeing with compulsory chipping in the UK:

- www.antichips.com
- <http://noble-leon.com>
- www.k9pe.com
- www.talk-big.com

Says Howard: "Any person who saw one of these aggressive tumours grow so quickly in a matter of months and take their dog's life would never, ever, have another pet chipped. If it became mandatory, I would not comply."

"The memory of those chips surrounded by the tumour killing my dog will remain with me forever. Lifting Seamus up and supporting him outside to walk and relieve himself during the decline in his health broke my heart on a daily basis; he died day by day, each day being a little less steady on his feet. He was a dog that only comes along once in a person's life and I hope telling his story will help prevent other dogs suffering the same fate."

"If chips are ever mandatorily required for dogs it won't be long before humans will be required to be chipped as well. This is worth fighting against since if it happens, freedom for humans will be over."

CHIP-VACC CONCERNS

Other reaction cases have been reported. One of these concerned a dog whose bald

patches apparently cleared up after his microchip was removed. Another reported sore ears, itchy paws and hotspots after her dog was chipped and vaccinated (chip-vacc'd) at the same time; the chip later migrated to the dog's chest and it was then that the 'allergy' problems began to manifest. It has not yet been ascertained whether it was the chip, vaccine or other cause that resulted in the dog's health problems.

Says Catherine Driscoll of Canine Health Concern (www.canine-health-concern.org.uk): "It took vets years to work out that vaccines could cause vaccine-site cancer in cats, and even now many vets are unaware of the research which shows vaccine-site cancer in dogs. Vaccines and chips tend to be given in the same place on the shoulder/neck; this means that should microchips be shown to cause unacceptable levels of cancer, those who stand to make money out of chips could say 'not my problem – it's the vaccine'. Pinning the tail on the donkey could be impossible."

One owner, whose French Bulldog, Leon, died after being diagnosed with a high-grade fibrosarcoma (cancer) in April 2004, learned (after much detective work and despite being given a royal runaround by the microchip's distributor and veterinary organisations) that his cancer was caused by the vaccines and/or the microchip he had received simultaneously seven months earlier. Since then Leon's owner has been campaigning vigorously via her website (<http://noble-leon.com>) to make people aware of the negative

aspects of microchipping pets.

Says Leon's 'mum': "Leon died in March 2006. After numerous frustrating attempts to report his adverse reaction, I realised that the adverse reporting system is a farce – no-one who should have been interested in Leon's case."

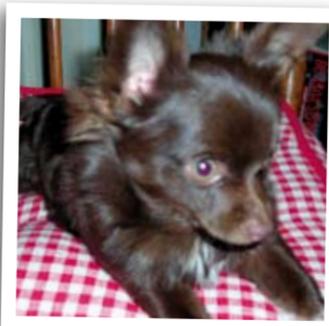
"I also learned that even today vets are not required to report adverse reactions to vaccines, microchips or to any other veterinary product."

"I believe that adverse reactions to vaccines, microchip implants and other veterinary products are not rare. Adverse reactions are often misdiagnosed, they are grossly covered up, and they are rarely reported."

bled to death

Then there are the cases where pets have died, or been damaged, by having a microchip implanted. And also of lost, microchipped, pets being put down because they were not scanned by rescue shelters, or due to incompatible chips/scanners, or were not scanned all over in case of migrated chips.

- As reported in the September 2009 issue of **Dogs Monthly** ('What you may not know about microchipping'; backs issues available on tel. 0845 519 0228), a long-haired Chihuahua called Charlie Brown bled to death when a mandatory microchip implant, against his owner's wishes, went horribly wrong.
- A Weimaraner puppy in Australia is said to have haemorrhaged and died when a blood vessel was punctured during implantation.
- A cat received a spinal cord injury when forcefully



Charlie Brown bled to death after being implanted with a microchip.

implanted by its owner, necessitating surgery and resulting in partial paralysis of a limb. Anyone in the UK can implant dogs and cats after paying for and receiving a short instruction course in the procedure; the 'guinea pigs' are usually people's own pets, or 'rescue' animals. In America, however, chip implantation should only be done by a vet, or under veterinary supervision.

- An alpaca died following inappropriate implantation into its spinal canal.
- In two separate cases, the inappropriate implantation of a microchip into the spinal canal of small-breed puppies resulted in paralysis that gradually resolved following the removal of the chip.
- A struggling kitten died when a chip was accidentally implanted in its brain stem.
- In 2005, four Dutch vets expressed their concerns over chipping horses, and collectively said, following treatment of one horse for head-shaking and neurological damage: "This not the first time we've seen a horse with problems as a result of chipping... all vets in our clinic share the opinion that



It is undisputed that chipping has helped reunite owners with missing pets, so when it works efficiently and without ill effects, chipping can be a good thing.

chipping horses is anything but safe.... we argue extensively in favour of a thorough research to see what consequences exist before chipping is applied extensively."

- Hadden, an American Pit Bull Terrier, escaped from his owner and ended up at an animal shelter in Virginia, America. The shelter's scanner failed to find his chip and Hadden was put down after the holding period – just 30 minutes before his owner contacted them.

When his owner described her dog, Hadden was scanned again with a different make of scanner and his chip was found. This is contrary to the idea that chips will identify lost pets, and that scanners are universal (will pick up any type of chip), and prevent this very thing happening.

YOU DECIDE

It is up to you to decide whether having a microchip implanted in your dog would be a good thing or not. There

is no doubt that chips have helped many a pet to be reunited with his owner, and apparently millions of pets have been chipped without suffering adverse reactions, but personally, for now, I'll pass on having my dog implanted. If your dog is already chipped, it's advisable to keep an eye on the implant area for unusual heat, swelling or lumps, and when he's vaccinated, ask the vet to avoid injecting in the chipped area just to be on the safe side.

Your views on this subject would be welcomed – write to **Dogs Monthly** at the address on page 4 or email caroline.d@dogsmoonthly.co.uk

Next month: Microchips, mandatory moves and money – why there's much more at stake for campaigners for compulsory chipping than you may be aware of, plus those for and against chipping have their say. Don't miss the July issue – on sale 3 June.

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