

Media Release

For Immediate Release

Biometrics: Enhancing Security or Invading Privacy? New Report Published

The Irish Council for Bioethics (ICB) is today launching its report entitled ***Biometrics: Enhancing Security or Invading Privacy? Opinion.***

Biometric technologies (e.g. fingerprint, voice, face and iris recognition) – once the realm of science fiction and film – are increasingly becoming part of our daily lives. Due to the marked rise in security threats and the escalation of identity theft, people are being required to identify themselves in order to travel, complete financial transactions or to have their time and attendance at work or school monitored.

Implemented appropriately and managed correctly, biometrics can both improve security and enhance privacy. Nonetheless, there are fears that an Orwellian “Big Brother” society will be the inevitable consequence of the increased use of biometric technologies. Questions arise regarding what type of information is collected and if the amount of information collected is proportionate to the amount actually required, how information is stored and whether there is any inappropriate sharing of that information.

Main Conclusions of the Opinion:

Proportionality: The ICB recommends that biometric applications be assessed on a case-by-case basis and that those wishing to implement a biometric programme outline the relevance and necessity of such a system, as well as the environment in which it will be used.

The Common Good: While the ICB recognises that a balance needs to be struck between individual rights and those of society as a whole (e.g. for security reasons), there are concerns that the common good may be over utilised as a means of justifying compulsory biometric programmes. The ICB recommends that where the common good is to be used as an explanation for using biometrics, then a detailed justification must be provided.

Privacy: The ICB recommends that information collected by biometrics systems should be limited to that necessary for identification and that where people no longer wish to use biometrics or where it is no longer of use the information should be deleted. The ICB encourages the use of personal storage devices (e.g. smart cards) as opposed to the use of large information databases. Additionally, the ICB strongly urges the use of encryption and the separation of biometrics information from other types of personal information (e.g. name, address and date of birth). Alternative non-biometrics systems should be available for those who do not wish to or cannot participate in biometric programmes to ensure that they will not be disenfranchised or discriminated against.

Trust and Transparency: It is important that people understand the purpose and implications of biometric systems and the potential consequences of their decision to participate or not. Therefore, the ICB recommends that policy makers and the biometric community should discuss the introduction of biometric

programmes in an open and transparent way, especially where participation in such programmes will be mandatory. Transparency requires not just education, the provision of information and accountability, but also an open debate with feedback from all stakeholders.

Speaking about the report Dr Siobhán O'Sullivan (Managing Scientific Director, ICB) said: "The ubiquity of biometrics begs the question whether any of us can lead truly private lives anymore. Privacy is intrinsically linked to our right to control access to ourselves and to our personal information so it is essential that people are informed about when and how their information will be collected and with whom it will be shared."

Dr O'Sullivan continued: "With proper safeguards in place, concerns regarding people being characterised as pieces of information rather than as individuals in their own right can be allayed."

Ends:

Notes to Editor:

- The Irish Council for Bioethics is an independent, national body set up by the Government in 2002 to consider the ethical questions raised by biological research and biomedicine, such as stem cell research, IVF, genetic modification and euthanasia. An important objective of the Council is to promote public understanding, informed discussion and education with respect to bioethical issues. For more information see www.bioethics.ie
- Bioethics is a discipline dealing with the ethical implications of research and practice in the biological sciences and medicine. It facilitates a deeper understanding of a range of moral choices, which can inform decision-making in areas of public policy and with respect to the direction and control of science. Bioethics is also a forward looking discipline, working to anticipate future questions of concern, encourage awareness about them and stimulate progressive debate amongst the public.
- A biometric is any physical or biological feature that can be measured and used for the purpose of identification. Features can be either physiological (e.g. fingerprint, hand geometry [shape], the face, the iris, the retina) or behavioural (e.g. voice pattern and gait [way of walking]).
- ICB Interest in Biometrics:
 - ❖ Ireland is the European hub for biometric development; the European Biometrics Forum is based in Dublin.
 - ❖ Irish citizens are increasingly likely to encounter biometric applications, particularly those relating to travel and immigration (e.g. US-VISIT – a visitor and immigration programme in the US under which people must have both their index fingers scanned and have their photo taken).
 - ❖ Over the last number of years there has been an increasing deployment of small-scale biometric applications in schools and workplaces with the aim of monitoring time and attendance.
 - ❖ There are two pieces of Irish legislation that mention biometrics specifically:

- The Passport Act 2008 (unspecified biometrics information may be processed in respect of issuing passports) and
 - Immigration, Residence and Protection Bill 2008 (foreign nationals seeking entry/residence must provide unspecified forms of biometric information). The Bill has not been enacted.
- Please see enclosed the Executive Summary of the ICB's Opinion Document ***Biometrics: Enhancing Security or Invading Privacy? Opinion*** and a FAQ document relating to biometrics.