

Fever Detectors

A recent headline in The New York Times reported that military hardware is being used to detect SARS. The technology is quite ingenious. It uses technology originally designed to spot enemies in the dark and modifies it to detect a heightened body temperature indicative of a fever. When people enter an airport through customs, people will be scanned by the devices, and if they have a fever they will be detained and inspected by medical personnel. The device will greatly reduce the number of medical personnel in the airport and it will allow them to remain on duty in hospitals.

Like most technological fixes, however, there are also a number of complications that arise from the implementation of new technology. Even though the technology may be able to detect an increase in body temperature and the signs of a fever, it will not be able to detect many other symptoms indicative of an infection. By removing nurses and relying on machines we may be improving one aspect of detection, while degrading another aspect. Will the machines be able to detect sneezing, congestion, or coughing? Clearly, each of these symptoms can appear at the onset of an infection without the presence of a fever. The danger in the implementation of the machines is not inherent in the machines themselves. The danger arises when people view these machines as a substitute for nurses.

The current action implementing this military technology is reminiscent of the precautions put in place to fight terrorism. Water detection systems, advanced metal detectors, bomb detecting devices have all been implemented in recent months. While each of these innovations provides us with another stepping stone to our objectives, none

of these technological advances should replace people. Machines are designed to accomplish specific tasks, and many are limited in the tasks that they can efficiently accomplish. If there are tasks that do not always comply with a predictable set of parameters, it does more harm than good creating partial solutions to the problem. Partial solutions can create more risk than they help alleviate. By creating a technological solution to a problem, one creates a sense of security among members of a community. The implementation of these fever detectors, for example, gives many people the sense that they are now safer from SARS outbreaks. In reality, however, they may be expediting the arrival process of passenger, while doing a less thorough job of checking for potential SARS infections.

The moral of this article, as with the other “technological fix” articles reviewed throughout the term, is quite simple. Technology should serve as a compliment to human operation. It should allow people to do their jobs better. It shouldn’t replace people. No matter how good a machine is at doing its job, it is always going to be restricted to what it can do. It won’t be able to adapt and observe environmental changes as well as an adept person. We, as a society, should move away from replacing human being with technology.