

## South Africa cemeteries to microchip tombstones

November 15 2013, by Carley Petesch

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Tombstones in the Westpark cemetery in Johannesburg Friday, Nov. 15, 2013. Johannesburg's city parks say it will allow microchips to be placed into tombstones in public cemeteries, where nearly 20 marble tombstones are stolen monthly, to curb the theft of marble and granite. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

(AP)—Amid a rash of tombstone thefts from cemeteries in Johannesburg, a company will be offering relatives of the deceased a high-tech solution: microchips that can be inserted into the memorial that will sound an alarm and send a text message to their cell phones if it is disturbed.

The city already allows [microchips](#) to be placed inside graves to help families locate their loved one's final resting places in the vast grassy spaces. Now, with thefts often carried out at night and the recycled marble or granite tombstones winding up in the hands of crooked stonemasons, authorities are taking technology a step further to foil those who take "graveyard shift" a little too literally.

The new tombstone microchips developed by a private company will be offered at the beginning of next year as part of the city's "smart" initiatives, said Alan Buff, the manager of Johannesburg City Parks Cemeteries and Crematoriums.

Nearly 20 marble tombstones are stolen monthly from the city's 36 public cemeteries, despite security guards and perimeter sensors. Buff said the city has allowed two pilot projects at its Avalon and Westpark cemeteries, and will roll out the technology further if it stems the thefts of the valuable items.

"This is peace of mind for the family," said Buff. "Tombstones are the property of the owner which is the family member, and you'll find you cannot insure a tombstone or it's too expensive for many. By doing this, it is insured."

The microchip system is called Memorial Alert, said Mark Pringle, the director of the private company that established the technology.

"We place a transmitter unit into the tombstone, so that it is not visible or accessible. Any unauthorized tampering activates a number of alarms," he said. First, a loud alarm goes off at the cemetery.

"This in itself should be a fair warning to the perpetrators," he said. Then text messages are sent to the mobile phones of delegated family members and any integrated security companies.

The technology has a provision to put a tracking device in it, but Pringle said the company is not including that in the first wave of installations because it decreases the battery life and would make it too expensive for many families. Considering that moving the heavy headstone will trigger alarms, Pringle said that should be enough to dissuade thieves from trying to lug it away and he is confident that tracking devices won't be needed.

Memorial Alert has a patent granted in South Africa, where it will officially launch in January, and also a British patent, Pringle said, adding that he hopes the technology will expand beyond South Africa since tombstone thefts are a worldwide issue.

A price for the chips and related fees have not yet been set.

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