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## Patient records to be sold from NHS database

Fears anonymous health data could be matched to insurers' medical files

Randeep Ramesh  
Social affairs editor

Drug and insurance companies will from later this year be able to buy information on patients including mental health conditions and diseases such as cancer, as well as smoking and drinking habits, once a single English database of medical data has been created.

Harvested from GP and hospital records, medical data covering the entire population will be uploaded to the repository controlled by a new arms-length NHS information centre, starting in March. Never before has the entire medical history of the nation been digitalised and stored in one place.

Advocates say that sharing data will make medical advances easier and ultimately save lives because it will allow researchers to investigate drug side effects or the performance of hospital surgical units by tracking the impact on patients.

But privacy experts warn there will be no way for the public to work out who has their medical records or to what use their data will be put. The extracted information will contain NHS numbers, date of birth, postcode, ethnicity and gender.

Once live, organisations such as university research departments - but also insurers and drug companies - will be able to apply to the new Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) to gain access to the database, called care.data.

If an application is approved then firms will have to pay to extract this information, which will be scrubbed of some personal identifiers but not enough to make the information completely anonymous - a process known as "pseudonymisation".

However, Mark Davies, the centre's public assurance director, told the Guardian there was a "small risk" certain patients could be "re-identified" because insurers, pharmaceutical groups and other health sector companies had their own medical data that could be matched against the "pseudonymised" records. "You may be able to identify people if you had a lot of

data. It depends on how people will use the data once they have it. But I think it is a small, theoretical risk," he said.

Once the scheme is formally approved by the HSCIC and patient data can be downloaded from this summer, Davies said that in the eyes of the law one could not distinguish between "a government department, university researcher, pharmaceutical company or insurance company" in a request to access the database.

In an attempt to ease public concern, this month NHS England is sending a leaflet entitled Better Information Means Better Care to 26m households, to say parts of the care.data database will be shared with "researchers and organisations outside the NHS" - unless people choose to opt out via their family doctor.

However, a leading academic and government adviser on health privacy said pursuing a policy that opened up data to companies without clearly spelling out privacy safeguards left serious unanswered questions about confidentiality.

Julia Hippisley-Cox, a professor of general practice at Nottingham University who sits on the NHS's confidentiality advisory group - the body that advises the health secretary on accessing confidential patient data without consent - said that while there may be "benefits" from the scheme "if extraction [sale] of identifiable data is to go ahead, then patients must be able to find out who has their identifiable data and for what purpose".

Hippisley-Cox added that "there should be a clear audit trail which the patient can access and there needs to be a simple method for recording data sharing preferences and for these to be respected".

Davies, who is a GP, defended the database, saying there was "an absolute commitment to be transparent" and rejecting calls for an "independent review and scrutiny of requests for access to data". "I am tempted to say that we will have 50 million auditors [referring to England's population] looking over our shoulder."

He said it was necessary to open up

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## Bliss for Blues Eto'o hat-trick



Samuel Eto'o celebrates his third goal in Chelsea's 3-1 Premier League win over Manchester United. Full story, Sport Photograph: Tony O'Brien/Action Images

## Rennard's allies say he is victim of conspiracy

Patrick Wintour  
Political editor

The dispute in the Liberal Democrats over sexual harassment allegations surrounding Lord Rennard, the party's former chief executive, was in danger of spinning out of control last night as his allies released emails that they claim prove there is a political conspiracy to damage him.

Critics of the party's handling of the affair complained that Lib Dem peers decided to give him back the whip at a meeting last week lasting four minutes.

Rennard's legal adviser, the Liberal Democrat peer Lord Carlile QC, also warned that the dispute could end up in the courts if Nick Clegg went ahead with threats to exclude him from the party, or the Lib Dem group in the Lords.

Clegg, who was backed yesterday by the chief secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander, has said Rennard should not be given back the party whip unless he apologised to the women he had offended. The party said it was inundated by demands for Rennard to face a fresh inquiry for bringing the party into disrepute. Rennard denies all the allegations against him.

Strenuous efforts have been made to defuse the crisis by trying to persuade Rennard to apologise for any offence his behaviour caused. But the ill feeling is now so intense that a partial apology may not now be enough to satisfy those demanding the party stand up for the women that have claimed for years, in private and public, to have been harassed.

Rennard is due to retake his seat today in the Lords, where many peers reiterate that no allegations have been proven.

Alistair Webster, the barrister who led the inquiry into Rennard's behaviour towards four women, told the peer it would be common courtesy that he apologise. Webster concluded in his report that the allegations could not be proven to the standard required for a prosecution.

But Rennard's supporters claimed there was a conspiracy between the women and solicitors to damage him. They released an email chain inadvertently sent to them showing the women taking up a suggestion from Lawrence Davies - lawyer for one of Rennard's accusers, Bridget Harris - to petition the Queen to have Rennard stripped of his peerage. The proposal, dubbed "part of media planning for Sunday", was enthusiastically taken up by

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