# Chinese access to NHS medical records raises security concerns



Chinese researchers are set to gain access to NHS medical records, a decision that has provoked significant controversy amidst warnings from MI5 regarding potential misuse of health data by Beijing. Concerns have been raised by Western intelligence agencies about the country's accumulation of sensitive information, which they perceive as a potential threat to national security.

The move involves data from the GP records of over 500,000 UK patients, which will be uploaded to the UK Biobank—a prominent research hub that facilitates access to data for universities, scientific institutions, and private companies. According to analysis, approximately one in five successful applications for access to this data originates from China, raising alarms regarding the implications of such access.

Former Conservative Party leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith described the situation as ‘outrageous,’ asserting, "China is an unfriendly country, and there should be a complete ban on any further NHS data going there." He highlighted concerns that China could leverage medical data to enhance drug development or understand genetic makeups for purposes that could include the development of targeted weaponry.

The UK Biobank currently houses a broad array of genomic information, tissue samples, and questionnaire responses from half a million individuals, all of whom have consented to the inclusion of their GP records. While personal identifiers such as names and dates of birth are omitted before data sharing, experts have expressed concerns that there is still a risk of individual identification, which could lead to espionage activities by rival states.

Participants who consented to their de-identified data being shared did not have the option to specifically address data sharing with China. A representative from UK Biobank confirmed that NHS England recently conducted an audit of its international data-sharing practices, including the assessment of applications from Chinese researchers, which it passed. As a result, Chinese researchers can now formally apply for access to the GP records.

Experts suggest that the acquisition of health data supports China’s long-term ambitions to enhance its biological capabilities, building a framework that transcends traditional military or economic strategies. Shadow National Security Minister Alicia Kearns voiced her apprehensions, stating, "The risk of our data being harvested to manufacture future bioweapons is real." She noted that China aims to become a biotech superpower and requires data from more diverse populations beyond its own.

In 2023, MI5 Chief Ken McCallum highlighted that hostile states like China are intently focused on emerging technologies such as synthetic biology. He stressed that countries leading in areas like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and synthetic biology would possess substantial influence over future global outcomes.

This issue has also been brought to the forefront by the history of UK Biobank granting access to research projects, including last year’s approval for a project on ageing by a subsidiary of the Chinese genetics company BGI. Notably, the US government has blacklisted some BGI subsidiaries over concerns that their actions pose a significant risk of contributing to China's military programmes. In response to these allegations, BGI has asserted that its research is conducted solely for civilian and scientific purposes.

A representative from UK Biobank remarked that there is ongoing dialogue with MI5 and other governmental agencies regarding the use of its data, including that related to BGI. A government spokesperson added that "strict security procedures" are established to protect sensitive UK health data, ensuring that access is restricted to a secure digital environment, from which data cannot be downloaded outside these confines.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/04/15/china-uk-patients-health-data/> - This article supports the claim that Chinese researchers will gain access to NHS data, despite MI5 concerns, and it highlights that the data includes GP records from 500,000 UK patients uploaded to the UK Biobank. It also discusses the controversy surrounding access to this sensitive information.
* <https://www.lbc.co.uk/tech/medical-data-china-guardian-uk-biobank-research/> - Corroborates the information about half a million UK GP records being accessed by Chinese researchers, raising concerns among Western intelligence agencies. It also mentions that one in five successful applications for this data access originates from China.
* <https://www.science.org/content/article/researchers-china-and-five-other-countries-concern-barred-nih-databases> - Provides context on the US NIH's actions to restrict access to biomedical databases for researchers from China and other 'countries of concern,' reflecting broader geopolitical concerns about sensitive data access.
* <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/china/uk-chiefs-warn-of-china-threat-as-critical-data-transfer-deal-is-agreed/> - Not directly available but can be inferred from similar reports that UK officials have discussed security risks associated with data sharing with China.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-biobank> - Although not directly mentioned, UK Biobank's official website would provide general information on data management practices that involve GP records and international collaborations.