

NHS medical records database halted amid concerns

After days of crisis talks officials agree to shelve the programme for six months and to launch a publicity campaign explaining the scheme and ensuring individuals are aware of their right to opt out

The controversial NHS medical records database has been halted amid widespread concern that the plans have not been properly communicated.

After days of crisis talks, officials on Tuesday night agreed to shelve the programme for six months - and to launch a publicity campaign to explain the scheme and ensure individuals are aware of their right to opt out.

The decision follows a growing backlash against the scheme, while supporters of the programme say the benefits have not been properly explained.

Officials from NHS England on Tuesday night agreed to the delay following two days locked in talks with The British Medical Association (BMA).

It followed sustained criticism of the handling of the scheme from patients groups, privacy campaigners, doctors and the Information Commissioner

The BMA and the Royal College of General Practitioners, (RCGPs) which between them represent more than 150,000 doctors, had said concerns had become so grave that the scheme should be put on hold unless there was a substantial publicity campaign, including national TV and radio advertisements.

The decision comes amid deepening concerns about the controversial database.

The changes are likely to mean most patients have until September to decide whether they want to opt out of the national scheme.

However a small number of GP practices may pilot the plans before then.

Tim Kelsey, national director for patients and information at NHS England, said: "NHS England exists for patients and we are determined to listen to what they tell us. We have been told very clearly that patients need more time to learn about the benefits of sharing information and their right to object to their information being shared. That is why we are extending the public awareness campaign by an extra six months.ö

Professor Nigel Mathers, Honorary Secretary of the RCGP, said: "We would like to thank NHS England for listening to the concerns of RCGP members and for acting so quickly to announce this pause. The extra time will provide it with the chance to redouble its efforts to inform every patient of their right to opt out, every GP of how the programme will work, and the nation of what robust safeguards will be in place to protect the security of people's data.ö

Those behind the £50 million scheme say it will improve healthcare and assist medical advances as health researchers and private firms will be able to access the data for such purposes.

But privacy campaigners and patients groups have raised fears that the data could be misused - such as by companies trying to target their products - or fall into the hands of insurers.

The data to be extracted from GP systems includes family history, vaccinations, referrals for treatment, diagnoses and information about prescriptions.

Public information leaflets were supposed to be sent to all households in England last month.

But polls have found two thirds of the public do not recall receiving a leaflet from NHS England explaining the new system.

Experts suggested that the because leaflets were delivered alongside junk mail, the pamphlets might have been overlooked.

On Monday the Daily Telegraph disclosed that the NHS's own risk analysis of the scheme warns it could jeopardise patient confidentiality if hacked or misused.

The Information Commissioner's Office accused health service officials of failing to properly explain the public's right to opt out from the national scheme, suggesting that extraction should be delayed until the matter was addressed.

The scheme is opt-out - meaning individuals have to inform their GPs if they do not want private data which could identify them to be passed from their surgery to the database.

Critics have raised concerns that it is too difficult to opt out, saying that an opt-out leaflet should have been sent to patients.

Earlier this week a YouGov poll of 1,100 adults that 65 per cent of the public oppose the plans, with just 17 per cent of those polled supporting the database.

Recent polls of doctors found that 80 per cent felt they themselves did not have a good understanding of how patient data would be used.

David Davis MP, a former shadow home secretary, said on Tuesday that the new database would be "a honeypot for hackers".