

Health Secretary has genome sequenced for project tackling health disparities

- Health and Social Care Secretary provided blood sample at Great Ormond Street for genomic sequencing programme
- Genomics England's Diverse Data Initiative is aimed at reducing disparities in healthcare

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid visited Great Ormond Street Hospital today to provide a blood sample for a genomic sequencing programme aimed at tackling disparities in health.

Genomics England's Diverse Data Initiative is working in collaboration with researchers and the NHS to ensure their life-changing work to sequence genomes benefits everyone, regardless of their ethnic socioeconomic or geographic background.

His data will be analysed by researchers to help speed up diagnoses and develop new treatments for patients with cancer and rare diseases as part of ongoing efforts to make healthcare more diverse and inclusive.

Secretary of State Sajid Javid said:

"I am extremely proud to be taking part in this study which is helping make sure that everyone, no matter their background, can benefit from our world-leading genomic research programmes.

"Genomics England's vital initiative will sequence the genomes of those who are under-represented in research data so that we can develop better treatments and transform healthcare for all."

To date, studies of human genetics have often been based on volunteers of European ancestry which means these communities may not be benefitting the genomic healthcare revolution. This has also contributed to the misdiagnosis of gene-disease relationships, poor 'generalisability' of research findings across different populations, and substantial barriers in safe and effective translation of genomic research into clinical care for everyone.

Genomics England is helping to reduce health inequalities by working in partnership with communities to analyse data from an increasingly diverse population, to rapidly improve the representation of under-represented groups in genetic data sets and research.

Genomics England CEO Chris Wigley said:

"Genomics has the potential to transform healthcare. The technology can provide new and faster diagnoses and enable the development of life-changing treatments for those with rare diseases, cancer and other conditions.

“However it has to work for all of us, and those who have non-European ancestry have been under-represented in research data and therefore risk not getting equal benefit as this comes into the mainstream of patient care. Through our Diverse Data Initiative we are making important progress in addressing that problem.”

By taking part in the initiative, the Health Secretary is now part of a community of research participants whose data is stored securely and anonymously by Genomics England among over 140,000 human genomes.

His blood sample will now be mapped by a sequencing lab at the Sanger Centre near Cambridge and stored in the National Genomic Research Library, alongside other participants of the 100,000 Genomes Project and the GenOMICC COVID-19 Study.

The new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) – launching on 1 October – will lead national efforts to level up public health by preventing illness and supporting people of all ages and in all parts of the country to live healthier lives.

The OHID will be a vital part of the Department of Health and Social Care and will drive the prevention agenda across government to reduce health disparities, many of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.