

11th April 2007

PIONEERING HEALTH PROJECT RECRUITS IN OXFORD

Residents of Oxford are being invited to take part in a multi-million pound visionary medical project that will help find out much more about curing many life-threatening and debilitating diseases.

UK Biobank will recruit people aged 40-69 from the city and, with their permission, track their health over the course of the next 30 years or more.

Around 15,500 letters asking people to take part in UK Biobank land on residents' door mats today (Wednesday 11th April) and many thousands more will arrive over the course of the next few months.

The project aims to recruit 500,000 people across Britain over the next few years. A successful pilot study to check the feasibility of this huge undertaking took place in south Manchester last year.

Though hosted by the University of Manchester, the project is led by Rory Collins, British Heart Foundation Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology at Oxford University. Some of the preparation work for the project has been carried out by scientists at the university.

UK Biobank is one of the biggest and most detailed public health research initiatives of our time. It will provide a valuable resource for research into a wide range of diseases including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, dementia, mental illness, Parkinson's disease, joint and dental disease and many other life-threatening and debilitating conditions.

Researchers, including some of the most eminent scientists from around the world, believe that UK Biobank will be an extraordinarily important resource for scientists for many years to come. It will help doctors and other medical researchers to develop a better understanding of the causes of many common diseases and to improve their prevention and treatment.

People in Oxford who agree to take part in UK Biobank will attend a 90 minute assessment at a special centre in Westgate Shopping Centre. They will be asked to allow UK Biobank to follow them through routine health records over many years. The assessment centre will open at the end of April.

Participants will be asked about their current health and lifestyle and will have a number of measurements taken, such as blood pressure, weight, lung function and bone density. They will also be asked to give small samples of blood and urine. Though not a health check, participants will leave with a list of personal health-related measurements and some indication of how they compare to standard values.

Professor Valerie Beral, Head of the Cancer Research UK Epidemiology Unit, Oxford University, and one of the leading scientists on the project, said: “We can’t do this without people’s help. Though UK Biobank may not directly benefit those who take part it will help our children and our children’s children to live longer, healthier lives. A willingness to help others in this altruistic way will, I hope, be a powerful motivation for many people to take part.

“At the assessment centre we will obtain the consent of people who want to join UK Biobank and collect what we call baseline information about their health and wellbeing. Along with the blood and urine samples, this will provide important data for scientists of the future when they are trying to work out what causes some people, and not others, to develop a particular disease.

“The UK Biobank resource will help untangle the complex interplay of nature (that is, genes) and nurture (such as lifestyle) in the development of many different diseases. Its goal is not to focus on genes alone, which may be better done through other sorts of study.”

Around 15 million blood and urine samples will eventually be stored for decades in specially designed laboratories near Manchester, at temperatures down to about -200°C.

UK Biobank is not just for the fit and healthy. “It is important that we involve the whole population. So if people who are not in good health receive an invitation to take part we would very much welcome them as participants in this remarkable health project,” said Professor Beral.

Dr Ken Fleming, Head of the Medical Sciences Division at the University of Oxford, said: “We are proud for Oxford University to be involved in what will probably the most important public health project in the next 20 years.”

Professor Collins said: “UK Biobank is a project of which the whole of Britain can truly be proud. We are talking to lots of British scientists about the ways this resource can help their research and, internationally, advising others who want to set up similar projects in their own countries.

“Health research has taken enormous strides in the past decade and we know a lot about how our bodies work, but we need to find out more. In setting up UK Biobank for researchers in the future - those who may only be in primary or junior school now or not even born – we are establishing the blood-based resource to do just that, and making a significant contribution to improving the health of future generations.”

People who receive letters asking them to participate in UK Biobank will be offered an appointment time and date. However, if the timing is inconvenient they can easily change this by calling 0800 0 276 276, Monday to Saturday, 8am-7pm. Participants will be able to confirm their appointment and find out more about the project by visiting UK Biobank’s web site:
www.ukbiobank.ac.uk

Taking part in UK Biobank is entirely voluntary and participants will be able to withdraw at any time should they wish to do so.

Recruitment is by invitation only, though most people aged 40-69 who live within a five to ten mile radius of the Oxford assessment centre can expect to receive an invitation to join in the months ahead. The opportunity to take part in this unique project will be made available to people in other areas of the country as assessment centres are rolled out over the next few months across Britain.

UK Biobank is funded by the Wellcome Trust, the Medical Research Council, the Department of Health, the Scottish Executive and the Northwest Regional Development Agency. It is hosted by the University of Manchester, has the support of the National Health Service (NHS) and is a collaborative effort between 22 UK universities. It has secured approval from a number of ethics and regulatory groups in relation to its research remit, recruitment process and the storage of blood and urine samples and access to participants' medical records over many years.

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