



Biobank looks for 250,000 to give health data

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MORE than 250,000 people in Wales will have vital data about their health collected for the next 30 years as part of a pioneering scheme unveiled yesterday to track the nation's well-being.

The results of the knowledge bank produced by the huge project are expected to give major clues to the on-going debate over whether certain medical conditions are caused by genetic faults or lifestyle choices.

The Biobank Cymru project was launched yesterday by First Minister Rhodri Morgan, who has contributed to the database.

Information will be collected on a range of diseases including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, strokes, dementia, depression, arthritis, osteoporosis, skin and lung disorders and many other life-threatening and debilitating conditions.

The First Minister, who has recently recovered from a heart condition, yesterday (Monday) urged people to sign up to the scheme.

He said, "I'm delighted to be here today, not least because my recent experience in being treated for a heart condition here at the University Hospital of

Wales really brought home to me how the latest technology and research makes our NHS the best health service in the world.

"But technology doesn't stand still and health scientists need to continue to build a broader, richer range of data in order to understand more about how we treat such life-threatening conditions.

"I was fortunate that the health service was able to treat me so successfully.

"Now that Biobank is being launched here, it means a fantastic opportunity for volunteers in Wales to do something positive for the health of the next generations.



"Through the Wales Office of Research and Development (WORD), the Assembly Government has also funded a mobile laboratory that will enable people in rural and hard to reach areas to participate in the project."

Invitational letters to participate in the project will be sent out to most people aged 40-69 within a 10-mile radius of Cardiff over the next six months.

The scheme will then spread to the rest of Wales over the next four years.

It is supported by the Chief Medical Officer for Wales, Dr Tony Jewell, and Ann Lloyd, head of department for health and social services and chief executive of NHS Wales, both of whom have signed the invitation letters to be sent out.

Cardiff's first assessment centre will open in Cardiff University's MediCentre, next to the University Hospital of Wales.

Dr John Gallacher, in the school of medicine's department of epidemiology, statistics and public health, is the UK Biobank academic lead in Wales.

He said, "I do hope people will want to be a part of this historic project.

"We are unable to pay people to participate and, because of the long-term nature of the project, it is unlikely most participants will directly benefit from the research that follows.

"However, there is a tremendous feel-good factor in taking part and knowing that you are contributing to the better health for all in future generations."

Cardiff follows Manchester, Oxford and Glasgow, which have all opened centres in the past six months.

Dr David Grant, Vice-Chancellor of Cardiff University, said, "As an international centre of medical research and education it is fitting that Cardiff University is participating in this multi-million pound visionary medical project to improve the health of future generations."

Participants are asked to donate a small amount of urine and blood to the resource and blood pressure, weight, lung function and bone density readings will also be taken.

Information on current health and lifestyle will also be recorded in an attempt to unravel the complex relationship between what is genetic and what is the result of lifestyle choices.

Although it is not a health check, those who take part will be given their personal health-related measurements and told how they compare to standard values.

Anyone taking part can withdraw from the project at any time, should they wish.

Professor Rory Collins, UK Biobank's principal investigator, said, "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.

"I do hope the people of Wales will embrace it in the ways that others have done elsewhere."

UK Biobank is funded by the Wellcome Trust, the Medical Research Council with further financial support from the Welsh Assembly Government, the Department of Health, the Scottish Executive and the Northwest Regional Development Agency.