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UK unveils £50 million genetics strategy

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The UK's [Department of Health](#) yesterday (June 24) unveiled a plan to revolutionize healthcare with the aid of gene therapy. It has pledged £50 million (\$83 million) over the next three years to increase genetic testing, to support gene therapy research, and to bring genetics-based healthcare into the primary care sector.

The blueprint, set out in a government white paper "[Our inheritance, our future - realising the potential of genetics in the NHS](#)," was hailed by new Secretary of State for Health [John Reid](#) as the beginning of a new era in which treatments are tailored to an individual's genetic profile.

"Our vision is for the National Health Service to lead the world in taking maximum advantage of the safe, effective, and ethical application of the new genetic knowledge and technologies for all patients as soon as they become applicable," the health secretary said in a press statement.

Reid pledged £18 million to be spent on upgrading genetics laboratories to prepare them for the expansion in genetic testing, plus another £4 million to be spent on developing gene therapy manufacturing facilities. Around £3 million would be devoted to research into how gene therapy can treat single-gene disorders, with another £2.5 million set aside for cystic fibrosis - the most common single-gene disorder in the United Kingdom.

The white paper also presents the idea of DNA testing for every baby born in the United Kingdom. The [Human Genetics Commission](#) will be asked to consider the proposal so that genetic profiles can be stored for life.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health told us that ministers had taken full account of safety concerns over gene therapy in drawing up the proposals.

[In the past year](#), gene therapy studies in the United States, Germany, and France [have been suspended](#) after two patients treated for severe combined immune deficiency developed leukemia-like side effects.

[There are ongoing concerns](#) about the use of retroviruses as vectors for gene therapy. As a result, the UK's [Gene Therapy Advisory Committee](#)(GTAC) was asked to investigate, and in April of this year it recommended more research into the safety of retroviral vectors.

The committee said that the effects of retroviruses in the context of gene therapy were "poorly understood" and called for "the possible oncogenic contribution" of endogenous mouse viruses present in the vector producer cell lines to be formally assessed.

Despite the safety concerns, GTAC Chairman Norman Nevin backed the white paper and insisted gene therapy "has unparalleled potential" for the treatment of many diseases.

[Medical Research Council](#) Chief Executive George Radda said the initiative could lead to "faster and more accurate" diagnosis of illness. And [Wellcome Trust](#) Director Mark Walport said he was "delighted" by the government's financial commitment.

But critics still have [concerns over privacy issues](#) and whether the potential for gene therapy is being overhyped by ministers.

Helen Wallace from the pressure group [GeneWatch UK](#) said in a statement that the government's promise to address concerns over the use of genetic information to discriminate against patients did not go far enough. Instead, GeneWatch UK wants cast-iron legal safeguards.

"There is a shocking lack of safeguards for people taking genetic tests. The white paper does not address the gaping holes in the legislation.

"The government has put the interests of industry above those of people. We face a future of creeping genetic discrimination unless steps are taken now."

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