



## NEWS

# Hundreds of cases need reviewing after letters were shelved

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Patient care and safety could easily have been compromised by a “serious” failing of a government agency to send important medical records onwards, it has emerged.

Large amounts of data on patients, including test results and diagnoses, were mistakenly put in storage between 2011 and 2016 by the NHS Shared Business Services agency before the mix up was discovered last year. Since then the vast majority of information and correspondence has now been delivered to hospitals and GP surgeries “wherever possible,” NHS England has said.

Details of the scale of the error emerged this week after the *Guardian* newspaper obtained documents showing that around 708 000 pieces of correspondence were undelivered over this period, though 200 000 of these were not clinically relevant.<sup>1</sup>

The data, which included copies of test or screening results and communications about planned treatment, were mistakenly kept in storage. The documentation was sent by hospitals and other GPs to practices in cases where the patient had moved away or was unknown so needed to be redirected.

NHS England has investigated and said that it had identified around 2500 “pieces of correspondence” whose retention meant potential risk of harm to patients and needed further investigation. So far no evidence of harm has been confirmed.

But information provided by the Department of Health for England to MPs on the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee during an evidence session for a separate inquiry on 27 February showed that the NHS had identified 173 instances that required further clinical review.

An NHS England spokesperson said, “Some correspondence forwarded to NHS Shared Business Services [SBS] between 2011 and 2016 was not redirected or forwarded by them to GP surgeries or linked to the medical record when the sender sent correspondence to the wrong GP or the patient changed practice.

“A team including clinical experts has reviewed that old correspondence, and it has now all been delivered wherever possible to the correct practice. SBS has expressed regret for this situation.”

General practices have been paid £2.2m (€2.6m; \$2.7m) collectively to compensate them for loss of time in carrying out the administrative work to deal with the backlog of data.

Richard Vautrey, deputy chair of the BMA’s General Practitioners Committee, told *The BMJ*: “This causes me very serious concerns. We have concerns about the way that yet another private company has failed to deliver what they were commissioned to do: in this case, to transfer important clinical information from one bit of the NHS to another, potentially putting patients at risk by failing to do so.

“It could have had an impact on safety for patients. These are hundreds of thousands of clinical documents that a clinician felt was important to pass from one clinician to another.”

Helen Stokes-Lampard, chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, said, “The information contained in these documents is vital for our patients’ health and wellbeing, and losing it could potentially pose a risk to their safety, not to mention a potential serious breach of their confidentiality.”

Shortly after the news emerged, England’s health secretary, Jeremy Hunt, was summoned to the House of Commons to answer urgent questions on the matter.

Hunt said, “We are assured that the data was not lost. It was kept in a secure setting, which means that it was safe and not breached, nor accessed by anyone else. What didn’t happen, and which is what should have happened, was that it was not passed on to the right GP surgery.”

Jonathan Ashworth, Labour’s shadow health secretary, said, “For a company partly owned by the Department of Health and a private company to fail to deliver half a million NHS letters, many of which contain information critical to patient care, is astonishing. Patient safety will have been put seriously at risk as a result of this staggering incompetence.”

1 Campbell D, Duncan P. NHS accused of covering up huge data loss that put thousands at risk. *Guardian* 27 Feb 2017. [www.theguardian.com/society/2017/feb/26/nhs-accused-of-covering-up-huge-data-loss-that-put-thousands-at-risk](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/feb/26/nhs-accused-of-covering-up-huge-data-loss-that-put-thousands-at-risk).

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