

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi, I'm Ewan Harrison. And I'm deputy director of COG-UK. Before the pandemic and now, I'm an academic microbiologist, particularly interested in bacterial genomics.

The challenges of data sharing inside countries and across international boundaries is obviously, an important one. For example, within the UK, there are four nations that make up there the UK. England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. And particularly Scotland and Northern Ireland, have slightly different legal systems and laws that mean that we have to take that into consideration when we were setting up the UK-wide consortium.

So that meant that, we had to consult widely with public health agencies, so that we could generate a consensus that everybody was happy for, that would fit with their legal systems. Likewise, with international data sharing, there are different laws between different countries, there are different populations, some of which may be more sensitive to data sharing, or there's greater risk at adoptive disclosure so more remote communities.

One piece of information about a sample in a remote community could basically identify somebody. So it depends on whereabouts you're taking samples from, the populations, and the population density. And I know that globally, many countries have faced different issues around these individual factors.

What we've always decided to do, in terms of our data release from COG-UK, was to keep it very simple. To minimise that risk of adoptive disclosure, we only release the date of the sample, and the country that it came from. So thus, reducing any risk of remote or rural communities a sample being identified as an individual.

Data sharing, as part of a genomic surveillance, is one of the foundational principles. And I think, the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of this. We can see, for example, with the emergence of, for example in the UK, potentially of the detection of the Alpha variant. Very rapidly that data was shared.

That allows scientists around the world to crowdsource and analyse that data. Then when it showed up in other countries, those genome sequences could be compared. Likewise, with the Delta variant and now with the Omicron variant.

International data sharing is a critical component of that. Also because scientists around the world are interested to work on that data. And having more minds looking at a piece of data can only really be a good thing.