



[REDACTED]

16 April 2025

Dear [REDACTED]

Freedom of Information request: FOI2025/00345

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on the 24 March in which you requested the following:

Your request:

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, I am requesting access to any historical records held by the Medical Research Council or UKRI concerning the Common Cold Unit (CCU), including:

Documentation or study reports detailing experiments involving intentional exposure of participants to cold or flu viruses.

Informed consent forms, participant protocols, or ethical board reviews for such experiments conducted between 1946 and 1989.

Internal or external correspondence with the Ministry of Defence, Porton Down, or other government entities concerning the CCU's work.

Information on how CCU results were shared, used in public health policy, or influenced pandemic planning.

If these records have been archived or transferred, please advise where they can be accessed.

Our response:

I can confirm that UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) holds information relevant to your request. Please see the information below.

We estimate that the cost of complying with your request would exceed the appropriate statutory limit as specified within Section 12 of the FOIA which for UKRI is set at £450. This represents the estimated cost of 18 hours of staff resource on locating, retrieving and extracting the information.

To explain further, the MRC Common Cold Unit (CCU) closed in 1990, and the vast majority of records still held by UKRI are in physical form and have not been digitised.

We have identified that UKRI holds 141 boxes of information related to the CCU in the MRC Science Archive. These boxes contain paper files and can hold around 2,500 pages per box. Even with a conservative estimate of 1 minute per page, to copy these documents so they can be shared would take approximately 40 hours per box.

Consequently, UKRI is not obliged under Section 12 of the FOIA to respond to your request.

Under Section 16 of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), our duty to provide advice and assistance to requesters, we have included a summary of the information held in the MRC Science Archive in Annex 1, along with details of additional files held, of which size cannot be estimated without a manual review, based upon available cataloguing data.

We have, however, identified a large amount of information that is already available online or held in other archives that is already available to you for review:

- A search for “[common cold unit](#)¹” in The National Archives (TNA) catalogue provides 30 results; 25 held by TNA and 5 by other smaller archives.
- A search for “[MRC common cold unit](#)²” in the Wellcome Collection catalogue returns 26 results; 25 archives and manuscripts and 1 book.

We have also identified some published literature which may be helpful:

- “[The origins of the Common Cold Unit](#)³” – David Tyrrell, from Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of London Vol. 24 (1990) p. 137-140
- “[The Medical Research Council Common Cold Unit, Harvard Hospital, Salisbury, Wilts, England](#)” – G.G Jackson, from Reviews of infectious diseases Vol. 11 (1989) p. 1020-1021
- “[Harvard hospital and its volunteers: the story of the Common Cold Research Unit](#)⁴” – Keith R. Thompson, published by Danny Howell Books 1990

We would recommend that you first review the information already publicly available at TNA and the Wellcome Collection. If this helps you to identify any specific topics or points of interest that may be held within the records we hold, as indicated in Annex 1, you can submit a new request providing as much information as possible, including a time frame in which you would expect the information to fall.

If you have any queries regarding our response please do let us know. If you are dissatisfied with the handling of your request, you have the right to ask for an internal review, explaining which elements of this decision you disagree with and why. Internal review requests should be submitted within 40 working days of the date of our response and should be addressed to:


Head of Information Governance
Email: foi@ukri.org

Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are still not content with the outcome of the internal review, you may apply to refer the matter to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the review procedure provided by UKRI. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: www.ico.org.uk.

If you wish to raise a complaint regarding the service you have received or the conduct of any UKRI staff in relation to your request, please see [UKRI's complaints procedure](#)⁵.

Yours sincerely,


Information Governance
Information Rights Team
UK Research and Innovation
foi@ukri.org | dataprotection@ukri.org

¹ https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r/1?_q=%22common%20cold%20unit%22

² <https://wellcomecollection.org/search/works?query=MRC+Common+Cold+Unit>

³ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5387570/>

⁴ <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/z5f4zq67>

⁵ <https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/contact-us/make-a-complaint/#skipnav-target>

Summary of Information Held in the MRC Science Archive	No of Boxes
Records of Laboratory Activity	10
Cohen study trials results and experiment cards	4
Common cold trial data: 001-1006 (Dated July 1946 to July 1989)	99
Gastroenteritis trial data: 01-25 (Dated January 1971 to October 1977)	1
Influenza trial data: 001-291 (Dated March 1954 to August 1983)	21
Parvovirus trial data: 2-6 (Dated January 1984 to May 1985)	1
Vitamin C co-operation trials between staff from Marks and Spencers, Debenhams, Wellworthy Ltd. and Harvard Hospital (Dated 1974 to 1976)	
Coronavirus and study of nasal epithelium trial data (Dated July 1984 to November 1984)	
Volunteer index cards, scrap books, records, trial record books, visitors' book, photos of staff and volunteers	5

Summary of Additional Files Held
Establishment administration (finance, agreements, collaborations)
Accommodation estate administration (site alterations, water works, health & safety)
Tenancy agreements for visiting workers and staff – 1982 to 1991
Staff inspection – 1980 and 1991
Collaboration with Wellcome Biotechnology Limited – 1984
Collaboration with MOD Dr D A J Tyrrell – 1998
Publications which mention the unit – also available from TNA