

Google betrays patient trust with DeepMind Health move

Moving healthcare subsidiary into main company breaks pledge that 'data will not be connected to Google accounts'

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▲ Google says the restructure is necessary to allow DeepMind's flagship health app Streams to scale up globally. Photograph: Stephen Lam/Reuters

Google has been accused of breaking promises to patients, after the company announced it would be moving a healthcare-focused subsidiary, [DeepMind Health](#), into the main arm of the organisation.

The restructure, critics argue, breaks [a pledge DeepMind made](#) when it started working with the NHS that "data will never be connected to Google accounts or services". The change has also resulted in the dismantling of an independent review board, created to oversee the company's work with the healthcare sector, with Google arguing that the board was too focused on Britain to provide effective oversight for a newly global body.

[Google](#) says the restructure is necessary to allow DeepMind's flagship health app, Streams, to scale up globally. The app, which was created to help doctors and nurses monitor patients for AKI, a severe form of kidney injury, has since grown to offer a full digital dashboard for patient records.



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“Our vision is for Streams to now become an AI-powered assistant for nurses and doctors everywhere – combining the best algorithms with intuitive design, all backed up by rigorous evidence,” DeepMind said, [announcing the transfer](#). “The team working within Google, alongside brilliant colleagues from across the organisation, will help make this vision a reality.”

DeepMind Health was previously part of the AI-focused research group DeepMind, which is officially a sibling to Google, with both divisions being owned by the organisation’s holding company [Alphabet](#).

But the transfer and vision for Streams looks hard to reconcile with DeepMind’s previous comments about the app. In July 2016, following criticism that the company’s data-sharing agreement with the NHS was overly broad, [co-founder Mustafa Suleyman wrote](#): “We’ve been clear from the outset that at no stage will patient data ever be linked or associated with Google accounts, products or services.”

Now that Streams is a Google product itself, that promise appears to have been broken, [says privacy researcher Julia](#)

[Powles](#): “Making this about semantics is a sleight of hand. DeepMind said it would never connect Streams with Google. The whole Streams app is now a Google product. That is an atrocious breach of trust, for an already beleaguered product.”

A DeepMind spokesperson emphasised that the core of the promise remains intact: “All patient data remains under our partners’ strict control, and all decisions about its use lie with them. This data remains subject to strict audit and access controls and its processing remains subject to both our contracts and data protection legislation. The move to Google does not affect this.”

The restructure has also resulted in the termination of the review board, which was largely staffed by British experts. The DeepMind spokesperson said: “The independent reviewers panel was a governance structure for DeepMind [Health](#) as a UK entity. Now Streams is going to part of a global effort this is unlikely to be the right structure in the future.”