The “Epidemiology-France” portal, designed and run by the French Public Health Institute (ITMO SP) within Aviesan and launched in 2011 as a follow-up to the 4th Strategic Council of Health Industries, identifies individual health databases in France.

The website allows identifying key sources of health data in France, from either public or private research, that can possibly be reused in a research perspective and/or public health assessment.

The main goals of this project are to promote the availability of information and transparency about health data, to support thematic tracking of data and existing skills in order to make the French expertise more visible, to contribute to the cooperation between teams, and to stimulate partnerships and new research projects.

The portal’s purpose is to provide a simple and transparent access to the description of health databases (metadata), without giving access to the data itself. In this respect, it is similar to what is done in the field of clinical trials (clinicaltrials.gov).

An editorial committee composed of epidemiologists and information processing specialists defined the rules for database description and ensures scientific integrity. A set of about 100 elements was designed specifically to describe the databases in the scope of the project and their content. The description of the bases is done under the responsibility of the project leader, while the portal team ensures the consistency and validation of the content.

The portal is bilingual (French/English): the main web pages and the interface are available both languages, while more than 86% of database descriptions have both a French and an English version.

This portal is a collaborative platform, and project managers are encouraged to describe their work themselves. However, the portal team also contributes to this work by actively looking for news databases to describe and contacting the scientists in charge to complete the description process.

In 2014, a metadata harmonization project started, in order to enhance the visibility of the metadata and enable metadata exchanges and partnerships with European and international counterparts.

In 2015, more than 800 databases are identified and described in the catalogue. The website also provides information about epidemiology research, data sharing and common usable databases for research.

The portal has a powerful search tool that allows visitors to explore the hundreds of databases within its scope. The search engine allows multi-criteria search on many of the descriptors, as well as catalogue exploration by database type or medical field, among others.

All database descriptions (i.e. ‘records’) can be downloaded either as PDF, CSV or XML files, which enables users to reuse the portal’s content for further work or integration in other systems.

The search engine also allows batch downloading of all records returned by any search, which can be a powerful tool to extract specific data from the portal.

The portal team has been continuously improving the interface as well as the descriptors used for the databases. Economic aspects of studies, follow-up procedures and detailed regional information, for example, have been recently included. The DDI-Codebook compatibility feature has also been recently added, and other standards and controlled vocabularies should be implemented in 2016.

In addition, substantive work is undertaken with foreign counterparts who manage similar platforms to make French health research more visible on an international scale.

The Epidemiology-France Portal is the first step of a major research infrastructure in epidemiology, which aims to enroll in similar European initiatives. In the future, the ITMO Public Health may be pushing this project on a European scale, and enlarge the portal’s scope to other fields or/and start including variable metadata.