



04 February 2019

Stephen Donnelly, TD

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PQ 2430/19

To ask the Minister for Health the waiting time for cervical smear test results; the number of women waiting for a repeat smear test following his commitment to provide same; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy

I refer to the above parliamentary question.

CervicalCheck processes approximately 250,000 cervical screening tests each year. In 2018, an additional 84,000 women came forward for screening, due to understandable concerns about cervical screening following the CervicalCheck audit. Almost 350,000 screening tests were submitted during 2018, and about 82,000 of these are still being processed by our laboratories.

This increased workload has led to long and very regrettable delays in the reporting of results. Results are currently being reported on average within 22 weeks of the test being taken; in some cases this is taking shorter time and in other cases results are being reported in a longer period of time. We continue to update our website with information on reporting times.

The natural history of cervical cancer would indicate that the disease would normally develop over a period of 10 to 15 years. Due to this very fact, it is important that any woman of screening age attends for cervical screening each and every time she is invited to participate. In this context, a period such as this for the return of cervical screening results, whilst undesirable, is not necessarily dangerous and poses a very low risk to women. The same risk threshold also applies in cases where a woman would be required to undergo a repeat smear test three months after the previous test as a result of an expired sample.

We recognise that these delays are difficult for women and, as previously stated, every effort is being made to improve the situation. Given the unprecedented surge in smear tests in 2018, and the lack of capacity, it is inevitable that this will take some time to resolve.

As part of our on-going negotiations with the laboratories, we are trying to source additional screening capacity, which would improve the turnaround time of results.

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An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála National Screening Service

Sourcing capacity and resources is a serious global challenge as countries start to move to primary HPV screening, which vastly reduces the requirement for cytology screening staff and is resulting in staff understandably seeking opportunities in other fields. This has limited our ability to source additional laboratory capacity and hence improve turnaround times.

In April last year, the Minister for Health announced that any woman of screening age with concerns about her cervical screening could avail of a free consultation, and if necessary, a free repeat smear test with any GP registered with CervicalCheck. These services ceased on 31st December 2018 as scheduled. Cervical screening is one of the best ways to prevent cervical cancer and the HSE recommends that all women aged 25 to 60 continue to attend their regular free smear tests when invited.

While efforts are on-going to seek resolution on this matter, it will remain a significant challenge during 2019. We apologise to patients affected and we want to assure the women involved that we are doing everything possible to improve this situation.

I trust this information is of assistance to you but should you have any further queries please contact me.

Yours sincerely

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An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service



BreastCheck
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Giúc
The National Breast Screening Programme



CervicalCheck
AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CEIRBEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



BowelScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Puitéige
The National Bowel Screening Programme



Diabetic
RetinaScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Radól do Diaibéitigh
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme