



16 June 2020

Deputy Peadar Tóibín
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ10846/20: To ask the Minister for Health the date for the reopening of cervical and breast screening cancer services in view of the fact that other non-essential services and businesses are now able to resume while patients awaiting life-saving health procedures have been left waiting; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Tóibín,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The National Screening Service's (NSS) four programmes: BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, BowelScreen and Diabetic RetinaScreen were paused in March 2020. This move was taken on public health advice due to the situation with COVID-19. The pause in screening was put in place to protect participants and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines. In addition, the HSE temporarily redeployed staff and resources to the response to COVID-19. However, clinical staff continue to work within the programmes.

People who were in the system at time of pause have continued to be treated as resources allow. For example, BreastCheck women who had been screened continued to have their assessments completed and their treatment plans mapped out by the service. Surgeries continued to be scheduled and completed. For CervicalCheck, colposcopy assessments and follow-up treatments continued for women who had been screened before the pause.

Below we outline the National Screening Service's plan for restarting screening services.

Programme restart plans

The four screening programmes are now finalising their plans for a phased reintroduction of screening. This is notwithstanding certain dependencies that remain outside the programmes' control.

The restart plans include:

- An analysis of treatment pathways available for screening to resume (GPs, labs, hospital units, surgery)
- The plans for clinical prioritisation for people due a screening test
- The provision of changed work practices in our service provider teams (eg. changes in consultation procedures, cleaning of equipment, and effect of these on capacity to screen)
- Securing PPE supply lines and clear infection control guidelines
- Close adherence to Public Health principles and guidance in order to keep patients and staff safe from COVID-19.

Framework to support the safe restart of screening

A return to screening is dependent on the operation of its treatment pathways within the wider health service. Screening restart plans are currently being aligned with the wider healthcare system. NSS Director of Public Health, Dr Caroline Mason Mohan, is NSS's clinical representative on the HSE

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steering group which is ensuring a coordinated approach to the resumption of non-COVID-19 related health services.

Dr Mason Mohan is also chair of an NSS working group providing a framework to support the safe restarting of screening. The work of the NSS group includes:

- Establishing protocols to comply with all HSE & Public Health social distancing and infection control guidelines, use of PPE gear, and reducing contact to protect patients and staff
- Evaluating the effect of safety protocols - such as cleaning of equipment, and waiting room throughput in clinics - on capacity and activity within screening
- Assessing the operation of diagnostic and management pathways and the willingness of people to attend appointments
- Endorsing a communications plan
- Reporting on challenges and dependencies of screening within the wider hospital system.

Screening restart timeline

The recommencement of screening is underpinned by the assumption that there will be no worsening of the COVID-19 situation & restrictions will continue to ease. Screening will restart as follows:

- A plan for a phased reintroduction of services is being signed off, following alignment with the wider healthcare system's restart of non- COVID-19 services
- Screening restart dates to be announced by end of June
- Extensive modifications of screening units to be completed, along with a final analysis on the effects of COVID-19 measures on the throughput of screening cohort
- Screening invitations to be issued on a phased basis according to clinical prioritisation.

BreastCheck

The phased reintroduction of BreastCheck is based on the following premises:

- Time between appointments increasing due to the need to clean the units / screening area between each appointment.
- Increase in assessment clinics required due to social distancing requirements.
- Demand for theatre appointments will increase due to increase in time required carry out surgeries in the host hospital (infection control procedures)
- Theatre space is also in demand for the treatment of symptomatic patients in acute hospital system.
- BreastCheck's static units continue to operate daily clinics for the large number of women of every age who are presenting within the hospital system with symptoms of breast cancer. BreastCheck is helping the hospitals work through their waiting lists of women with symptoms. We are prioritising these urgent / high-risk cases.

CervicalCheck:

The phased reintroduction of CervicalCheck is based on the following premises:

- Invite letters for the 'paused' cohort will be sent in order of clinical prioritisation
- Routine cervical screening will resume on a phased basis, with priority given to annual surveillance rescreens, overdue screens, and priority populations

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- Increased time per appointment/ procedure expected due to implementation of COVID-19 protection measures (physical distancing, patient checks, limitations on numbers in waiting rooms, cleaning pre and post-treatments etc).

For other queries patients can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, email info@screeningservice.ie or contact their clinic directly.

For those people worried about symptoms during the pause, we continue to advise that screening is not for people with symptoms. We would encourage those who are between screening appointments, or waiting for rescheduled appointments; to be aware of, and act upon, any symptoms associated with the conditions for which they are being screened. We ask that those people contact their GP, who will arrange appropriate follow-up care

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

Celine Fitzgerald
Interim CEO
National Screening Service

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National Screening Service



BreastCheck
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Uacht
The National Breast Screening Programme



CervicalCheck
AN CLAR NÁISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CERVICÉAC
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



BowelScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Píobairí
The National Bowel Screening Programme



Diabetic RetinaScreen
An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Retine go dtuairisc
The National Diabetic Retina Screening Programme