



11 June 2020

Deputy Gino Kenny
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ9712/20: To ask the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many persons are experiencing anxiety and stress while waiting for cancer screening services to resume; if a date will be committed to for their earliest resumption; if a guarantee will be given that extra resources will be deployed to ensure that waiting lists for the services are cleared as quickly as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Kenny,

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.

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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 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.

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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