



27 May 2020

Deputy Niamh Smyth
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ6359/20: To ask the Minister for Health the status of the full resumption of BreastCheck and cervical smear tests for those in need; and if his attention has been drawn to the concerns regarding the cessation of these assessments

Dear Deputy Smyth

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The National Screening Service (NSS) develops and manages delivery of population-based, call-recall, national screening programmes: BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, BowelScreen and Diabetic RetinaScreen. The aim is prevention and early detection of disease to reduce deaths and incidence of disease in the populations screened.

Each programme provides free screening at defined intervals to a specific target population. Almost 2 million individuals in Ireland are eligible for at least one of the programmes.

The NSS programmes have been paused until further notice. This move was taken on public health advice due to the situation with Covid-19. The pause was put in place to protect patients and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines. In addition, the HSE temporarily redeployed staff and resources, where available, to the response to Covid-19. However, clinical staff have continued to work within the programmes.

Please be assured that the health, wellbeing and safety of the people who use our service, and the medical staff who operate the service, continues to be our top priority at this time.

The status of BreastCheck and CervicalCheck is as follows:

BreastCheck

- Patients in the referral or treatment pathways are continuing to meet with their surgeons and have their treatment plans mapped and explained.
- Each of the BreastCheck Units is continuing with surgeries as available through their respective host hospitals. Patients are being prioritised for surgery based on clinical need.
- Nursing staff are continuing with ongoing cancer management. Patients with hormone-positive breast cancer have been put on hormone treatment, where possible, and others continue to receive neoadjuvant chemotherapy.
- BreastCheck is providing support to symptomatic breast services for women of all ages in the South, West, Eccles and Merrion units respectively.

CervicalCheck

- We have paused sending invitations and reminder letters for cervical screening. GPs have been asked not to take samples during this period.

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- This pause is for community testing (GPs and clinics) and not for patients already referred to or in the process of being managed within the colposcopy system. These patients will continue to be cared for as hospital resources allow. Colposcopy units are prioritising their work in line with clinical need and staffing availability.
- The programme made the technical transition to HPV cervical screening on 30 March. Samples taken after this point are tested first for the presence of the HPV virus.
- Patients referred to colposcopy services are outside the screening programme and are managed under local arrangements.

The NSS is finalising comprehensive plans for restarting its services in a safe way, which will ensure that all who have missed out on screening can avail of a test in a phased basis over a period of months.

These plans include:

- An analysis of the operation of treatment pathways
- Ensuring providers have full teams in place for delivery of the service in a timely way
- The provision of changed work practices in all our teams and a schedule for their implementation
- Use of PPE and clear infection control guidelines
- A communications strategy
- Close adherence to Public Health principles and guidance in order to keep patients and staff safe from COVID-19.

When restart dates are finalised, invitations for breast and cervical screening will be issued according to clinical prioritisation, and taking the screening and treatment pathways into account.

The screening programmes continue to advance their recommencement plans, notwithstanding certain issues that remain outside of their control.

In addition, the NSS has established a cross-functional working group to support the managed restart of its programmes. It is chaired by Dr Caroline Mason Mohan, NSS Director of Public Health, and Interim Clinical Director of CervicalCheck. The group will work with the HSE steering group chaired by Dr Colm Henry and Anne O'Connor, on the continuity of system-wide non-Covid healthcare.

The Group is reviewing the individual programme plans for recommencement, and providing a framework to support the safe restart of screening. This framework will ensure that all those who have missed out on screening can avail of a test in a phased basis over a period of months.

The principles of the NSS working group include:

- Prioritisation and management of waiting lists
- A risk assessment tool
- Guidance on infection control considerations for screening programmes and use of PPE
- Support to modelling of the programme capacity to inform planning
- Clear communications to the public and stakeholders of the restart in each of the programmes.

It is important to emphasise that screening is not the correct pathway for people who have symptoms. Women who are in-between screening appointments, or waiting rescheduled appointments, are being asked to be aware of, and act on, any symptoms associated with the conditions being screened for.

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If a woman has concerns about symptoms she is urged to contact her GP immediately. For other queries, she can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, email info@breastcheck.ie or info@cervicalcheck.ie or contact her clinic directly.

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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