



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

12 November 2020

Deputy Róisín Shortall
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ34439/20: To ask the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to concerns raised by those awaiting breast cancer screenings and checks in relation to increased waiting times; the steps he is taking to address these increased waiting times; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The BreastCheck programme resumed nationally on Tuesday 27 October 2020. During the pause in screening, BreastCheck redeployed services to assist acute hospitals in managing their waiting lists of women with breast symptoms.

This temporary redeployment of BreastCheck resources enabled high-risk patients with symptoms to be seen quicker, with the aim of improving the outcome of any diagnosis during a time when breast health resources were constrained. We know that this cohort of symptomatic women have a significantly higher rate of cancer, and more time-dependent diagnosis, than the screened cohort. (For example, if we provide mammography to 1,000 healthy women we will pick up seven cancers. If we provide mammography to 1,000 symptomatic women we will pick up 100 cancers).

This work has now been completed and BreastCheck is resuming its screening service for healthy women.

Waiting times

You raise concerns in relation to those 'those awaiting breast cancer screenings and checks in relation to increased waiting times'. Screening is a voluntary procedure where people who are presumed well are invited routinely to complete a screening test, and are not per se on a waiting list and do not have waiting times before being seen on an allotted date, as they do in the symptomatic service. When we invite people for screening, we know that many people do not make an appointment or take up a screening test when they receive their letter.

At the beginning of each year we make an assessment of the number of people we expect will take up their invitation for screening during that year. However, the projections for 2020 do not account for the advent of a global pandemic and therefore are not a useful benchmark figure at this time.

The focus of BreastCheck's restart is to achieve a maximum screening invitation rate that is compatible with a safe and controlled follow-up assessment and our treatment capacity within the health service.

Appointment invites

BreastCheck operates a two-yearly screening round. However, owing to the pause in screening and ongoing COVID-19 preventative measures, screening will take longer to complete. This means we will not be able to invite everyone due a screen this year by the end of 2020.

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☎ 353 1 865 9300 ✉ info@screeningservice.ie www.screeningservice.ie



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Specifically, the need for comprehensive PPE and other infection control measures have limited the capacity to address both symptomatic and screened patients in a safe environment within the same timeframe, pre-COVID.

BreastCheck is doing everything in its power to screen as many people as possible as safely as possible. While we do not wish for any increase in the period between screens, screening will still be within European norms. Ireland is fortunate to have a two-year interval compared to Britain which has a three-yearly cycle.

Addressing capacity

We are actively recruiting staff and looking at other ways to maximise capacity. For example, we are asking staff to work additional hours where possible but we cannot afford to risk ill-health in our staff by not taking regular breaks and rest. We are however facing challenges in staff recruitment, as there is finite level of trained staff available to healthcare worldwide, regardless of available budget.

In addition, a targeted information and awareness campaign is working to encourage those who are invited to attend for screening so that we can maximise screening uptake. For example, the animation on the BreastCheck webpage [here](#) explains how we are making screening safe. People are being assured that our clinics and mobile units are working hard to keep everyone safe when they go for their appointment. Crucially, the public can play their part in maximising capacity for the benefit of all. If people are not able to attend their appointment, we are asking them to let us know, so we can make the appointment available to someone else.

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

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

Fiona Murphy
Chief Executive
National Screening Service

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