



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

13 October 2020

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ30301/20: To ask the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to clear the backlog of BreastCheck screening appointments; if appointments will be expedited; his plans to make BreastCheck screening in private hospitals free for persons waiting for screening and utilise all available resources in the interim; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

As you know, the population-based screening programme BreastCheck has been paused on public health advice since 16 March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 to the response to COVID-19. However, clinical staff have continued to work within the programme.

BreastCheck is projected to return to screening in October 2020. Because screening is a population health measure for people who are presumed healthy and do not have symptoms, we are prioritising how we use our breast health resources for the maximum benefit of all women, for a short period longer.

The onset of winter places additional strain on health resources, and this is coupled this year with increasing measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. This means that the screening service is continuing its essential support of symptomatic breast services in their host hospitals for a little longer. BreastCheck is currently providing its staff and facilities for the care, diagnostics, treatment and surgery for breast cancer patients referred to the symptomatic services.

This priority work will ensure the best outcome is achieved for women of all ages with symptoms of breast cancer. It will also increase treatment capacity for screening participants, should they require it, when screening resumes.

It is therefore important that we continue to encourage all people 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.

While we await confirmation of a restart date, BreastCheck has finalised its plans to resume screening on a phased basis. These include:

- a structured approach to scheduling appointments
- a new process, which includes the use of new technology, for notifying women of their appointments during COVID-19
- priority invites issued to those waiting longest
- a phased testing of the breast screening pathway ahead of full resumption

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- reduction in capacity for screening due to social distancing and potential staff limitations due to COVID-19

BreastCheck offers free screening at each of its 4 static units and 21 mobiles at locations across the country. There is no current plan to offer free screening at private hospitals but due consideration is being given to all options to increase screening capacity, including actively engaging in further recruitment rounds for radiography staff to maximise workforce capacity.

As screening restarts, we are ensuring all parts of the system have sufficient capacity to process the volume of tests. We are taking safety measures to protect both patients and staff, such as social distancing measures and face coverings. This can mean that appointments may take longer and that it may also take longer to get an appointment. We will continue to follow public health guidelines. The health and safety of our patients and staff is priority, and the resumption of screening services is dependent on ongoing restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The resumption of screening services is dependent on ongoing restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Screening is a population health measure for people who are presumed healthy and do not have symptoms. The aim of a population screening programme is to reduce the incidence of disease in a population. Screening is not a diagnostic tool and no screening test is completely accurate.

All screening programmes are limited by the sensitivity of the test which is the ability to detect those with the disease in a population (true positives). Screening programmes are likewise limited by the specificity of the test which is the ability to detect those who are free of the disease (true negatives). Therefore, a negative test result is not a guarantee that a person is clear of the condition, or that they won't develop the condition between screening appointments.

The NSS continues to encourage all people 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.

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