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Dáil Éireann  
Leinster House  
Kildare Street  
Dublin 2

**Ref:** PQ 27440/20

21<sup>st</sup> October, 2020

Dear Deputy Higgins

**Question:- To ask the Minister for Health the reason Covid-19 advertisements do not feature hard-hitting messages on the impact of the virus similar to road safety and anti-smoking advertisements; his plans to target hard-hitting ads towards young persons highlighting the potential long-term health consequences to them if they contract Covid-19 and the impact if they infect older members of their family; his plans to copy the successful strategy of road safety advertisements by featuring survivors of Covid-19 and relatives of those that have passed away from the virus in advertisements; and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Question, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for a response. I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position.

### **COVID-19 Public Information Campaigns**

The HSE and the Department of Health, with NPHET, have led the overall response to COVID-19, which includes the extensive public information, advertising and education and stakeholder engagement programme. Communicating with the public, listening to their needs and giving accurate and easy-to-follow health advice is considered a central part of any country's pandemic response plan.

The COVID-19 public information campaign uses a range of communications channels, including media relations, websites, social media, search advertising, digital display, posted materials, out of home (posters, billboards, projections, transport) and TV, video on demand, radio and digital radio advertising, to provide clear public health advice that is easy for people to understand and act on.



We make sure that we include everyone in Ireland in our communications and our support. We engage widely with partners, advocacy groups and all sectors of society, asking for help to share messages, and checking that we have included everyone. We have developed an extended suite of flexible content, suitable for various audiences and people with different needs and in varied circumstances; this includes information in a range of languages, Irish Sign Language, braille, audio, easy-read and large print.

It is important to note the support that has been provided by all sectors of society to our communications programme. This has come from the wider Government, fellow public services, and from private organisations and businesses. We are grateful to everyone who has helped shape, publish and share our critical health advice at this time, and to the public who are taking the essential actions to help slow down the virus and protect people.

### **Public Information Campaign Messaging**

Our focus has been on providing clear, easy to understand information on the actions we all need to take to reduce the spread of the virus and information on how people can access the health services they need is a safe way. Alongside this, we have sought to encourage a sense of solidarity and community as we never before has our individual wellbeing depended so much on our collective actions.

There is strong evidence to show that mass media campaigns can change behaviour. The evidence is strongest in relation to smoking and road traffic accidents<sup>1</sup>. When it comes to the style of messaging used to encourage people to stop smoking, the inclusion of messages about the negative health effects of smoking have been shown to be effective in changing smoking knowledge, attitude and behaviour in a way that promotes quitting.<sup>2</sup> However, exposure to campaigns with positive messages has also been shown to be effective at prompting people to seek help.<sup>3</sup>

Although ‘hard hitting’ or negative emotive messages have been shown to be effective at encouraging people to stop smoking and improving road safety, this approach does not work for all behaviours. While targeting fears can be useful in some situations, its effectiveness is limited. Strong fear based messaging can change behaviour but can also result in defensive avoidance where people deny the importance of a danger or the importance of them taking action.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wakefield M et al. Use of mass media campaigns to change health behaviour. *The Lancet* 2010; 376: 1261–71.

<sup>2</sup> Durkin S, Brennan E, Wakefield M. Mass media campaigns to promote smoking cessation among adults: an integrative review. *Tobacco Control* 2012;21:127-138.

<sup>3</sup> Richardson et al. How does the emotive content of televised anti-smoking mass media campaigns influence monthly calls to the NHS Stop Smoking helpline in England? *Preventive Medicine* 2014;69:43-8.

<sup>4</sup> Witte, K. & Allen, M. A meta-analysis of fear appeals: implications for effective public health campaigns. *Health Educ. Behav.* 27, 591–615 (2000).



Insights from social science suggest that encouraging a shared sense of purpose, promoting preventative behaviours as a social norm, ensuring that people know where they can go for trusted information, and highlighting that we all benefit from each other's actions to prevent the spread of infection are central to the COVID-19 response.<sup>5</sup>

HSE and Department of Health conduct regular research with the public to check on people's understanding of and their reaction to the information and ongoing situation, monitor compliance, gauge levels of comfort with accessing healthcare, and the level of trust and wear out of COVID-19 messaging, allowing any new messages or content to be developed in line with their feedback.

Consistently high satisfaction levels with the HSE and Department of Health communications has been reported in our research and listening exercises. Reported levels of compliance with public health measures remain high with the majority of people reporting high levels of personal compliance and compliance among others.<sup>6</sup>

### **Current public information campaigns**

In order to keep people engaged, we create new advertising assets and concepts regularly and have created upwards of 10 separate mass media campaigns since March 2020. Research with target audiences, emerging evidence and priorities, and insights into media consumption are used to develop tailored messages and media plans to target different groups. This approach allows us to respond to what is a dynamic and changing situation

Detail on our current campaigns is given below.

#### **Living with COVID, August 2020**

This campaign features a refreshed look and feel which is a move away from the standard COVID-19 visual identify and reinforces the importance of keeping up the important actions that keep us safe. This campaign runs across TV and VOD, radio, OOH, digital and social.

#### **Symptoms and testing, September 2020**

Advertisements to remind people of the symptoms of COVID-19 and importance of going for testing on TV and VOD, radio, digital and social media.

#### **Campaigns specifically for younger audiences:**

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<sup>5</sup> Bavel, J.J.V., Baicker, K., Boggio, P.S. *et al.* Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nat Hum Behav* 4, 460–471 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0884-z>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6b4401-view-the-amarach-public-opinion-survey/#>



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This week, we are launching two new communications campaigns for people aged 16-25 and 25-44, using social media messages and content, traditional advertising, and a programme of engagement with well-known people on Instagram and TikTok.

### **We are all the answer, October 2020**

This campaign extends the reach of the Living with COVID campaign by taking a segmented approach to target different audiences with tailored messages and through appropriate channels on social media. Young adults 16-25 and adults aged 25-44 are two of the target audiences for this campaign along with parents and older adults.

The social media element of this campaign is centred around the fact that we all have a role to play when it comes to fighting COVID-19 and asks people to take key actions to be part of the solution and our message is promoted across Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Youtube and Twitter.

As part of this campaign, we are working with well-known people and people with large followings on social media to share examples of the actions, which they are taking to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

There is also a content series in development sharing stories of people who have been affected by COVID-19 due to launch in November.

### **The Bubble, October 2020**

The Bubble - a new campaign aimed mostly at those under 25 went live from 20 October. The first phase includes TV, social and digital formats. The idea of the Bubble is to create a visual reminder for the protection we share when we follow public health actions, a bubble of protection, and also paint a picture of how easily it can be lost. This campaign is going to be aired widely on social media, on TV and on digital content players online.

With cases rising in those under 25, we are working with a newly-formed group, including the Department of Health, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and organisations who advocate for and represent young people. With them, we will create new advertising assets and messages that are from young people, for young people, over the coming months.

I trust this addresses your question. If I can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours truly,

Mary Brodie  
Business Manager, Communications Directorate