



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

22 March 2021

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

PQ11785/21: To ask the Minister for Health the status of progress of the commitment to establish a national laboratory for cervical cancer screening; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ11786/21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of samples that have been received at CervicalCheck laboratories for January 2021 and for January 2020, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ11787/21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of persons who were invited to attend a cervical screening appointment via CervicalCheck in 2019; the number of these persons who attended the appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ11788/21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of persons who were invited to attend a cervical screening appointment via CervicalCheck to date in 2020; the number of these persons who attended the appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ11789/21: To ask the Minister for Health the number of colposcopy clinics that are currently operating at full capacity to examine persons with smear abnormalities who have been referred on for further examination during the current Covid-19 level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ11790/21: To ask the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to difficulties being faced by persons seeking access to cervical cancer screening appointments via their general practitioner surgeries under current Covid-19 level 5 restrictions; the measures that have been undertaken to ensure that any short term delays being encountered will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ11791/21: To ask the Minister for Health the measures that have been put in place to manage backlogs which have built up within the cervical cancer screening services as a direct result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above seven Parliamentary Questions which I propose answering in one combined reply. I trust you are supportive of this approach.

National Cervical Screening Laboratory (NCSL)

The National Screening Service is progressing with the development of the National Cervical Screening Laboratory (NCSL) in collaboration with the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital. The building work is progressing according to schedule and CervicalCheck has received funding this year to resource the new laboratory with equipment and staffing in advance of completion of the NCSL build in 2022.

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National Screening Service



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Cúc
The National Breast Screening Programme



AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAETHÁSTÁLA CÉIRBEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Putóige
The National Bowel Screening Programme



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Retiní de Dhiabéiteigh
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme



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Cervical screening tests

CervicalCheck resumed screening after a three-month pause on July 06 by prioritising inviting the longest waiters. We are thankful to all our participants and sample takers who have responded to screening invitations since we restarted. By the end of December 2020, we had issued a first invite letter to everyone due screening in 2020. We issued over 270,000 invites in 2020 and screened over 143,000 people in primary care.

We invited over 209,000 people and screened around 210,000 people in primary care in 2019. It is important to understand that invitations do not equal tests; many people do not make an appointment with a CervicalCheck registered sample taker when they receive their letter.

In January 2019, c21,000 people underwent a cervical smear test, and in January 2020 that number was c17,000*. From the 01 to 26 February 2021, c88,000 invitations and reminder letters have been received and c21,000* samples have been received from primary care, less than the 23,000 slides per month normal throughput in screening and in line with programme standards.

We are currently running a communications campaign on digital, social and national media (radio and out-of-home advertising) to inform women about the new HPV screening test and to encourage all those due their screening test in 2020 and 2021 to book their appointment when due. This will enable us to manage capacity and ensure those who are due follow-up tests receive them in a timely manner.

Colposcopy

Colposcopy clinics have worked hard throughout COVID-19 to reduce the waiting lists that resulted from the offer in 2018 of free smears which was taken up by close to 100,000 women. The resulting waiting list for referrals to colposcopy continued into 2020. During the three-month pause in screening in primary care, colposcopy units continued to work through this waiting list as hospital resources allowed. When screening resumed, most colposcopy waiting lists had been cleared. So even though the number of new referrals has been lower, colposcopy clinics have been busy during 2020.

COVID-19 has affected capacity in colposcopy units. Despite the challenges faced by the service, c13,000 new patients and c36,000 return patients were seen and cared for in colposcopy clinics around the country in 2020.

All of the procedures put in place to protect patients and staff from COVID-19, including COVID-19 triage, increased decontamination after each patient, and extended time between appointments to ensure social distancing in waiting rooms, have impacted on the numbers of women seen per clinic.

Colposcopy clinics are continuing to work at capacity to see women referred for treatment.

Primary care

CervicalCheck is aware that some GP practices and community clinics may have been operating at reduced capacity in January 2021, due to unprecedented levels of COVID-19 in the community.

CervicalCheck continues to support GP practices and community clinics making individual decisions about the level of screening that is safe for them to provide, as they adhere to Government guidelines and Public Health advice about the spread of COVID-19 and participate in the vaccination programme.

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We continue to ask women to keep in touch with their GP and to take the earliest appointment offered to them. We are also letting women know that they do not need to book for screening with their own GP, and can book with any sampletaker in their area. A list of registered sampletakers is available on our website [here](#).

We also ask that people do not attend their appointment if they are unwell or self-isolating because they have symptoms of COVID-19. People should not attend either if they are a confirmed close contact of someone who has tested positive for coronavirus.

Cervical screening is for well people who do not have symptoms. Anyone who is worried about symptoms at any time is advised not to wait for screening but to contact their GP immediately, for 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

*provisional figures

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BowelScreen
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Diabetic
RetinaScreen
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The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme