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Deputy Paul McAuliffe
Dail Eireann
Leinster House
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Dublin 2

19th October 2021

PQ ref: 47485/21

Question: To ask the Minister for Health his plans to increase the testing of HIV; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy McAuliffe,

Thank you for your question to the Minister for Health, which was forwarded to my office to respond to you directly.

HIV Testing

HIV testing is an integral part of HIV prevention, enabling people living with HIV to access effective treatment early such that they can yield the benefits for their own health in addition to becoming non-infectious to sexual partners.

Improving testing access and capacity is critical to increasing HIV testing. This is achieved by offering a range of options to individuals for testing, including routine opt-out HIV testing within antenatal services; HIV testing to all attendees at public STI clinics; community led HIV testing and more recently free online STI/HIV testing.

The HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP) has funding agreements in place with NGO partners in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick for the provision of community HIV testing, which targets specific populations such as gbMSM and migrants. In particular, a funding agreement is in place with HIV Ireland for the MPOWER programme, providing peer-driven community-level interventions which aim to achieve a reduction in the acquisition of HIV and STIs and an overall improvement of sexual health and wellbeing among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM).

In 2021, with co-funding from the Sláintecare Integration Fund, the SHCPP established a pilot online STI testing service, integrated with public STI services, which ran between January and May 2021. During this time, the service dispatched 13,695 home HIV testing

kits across three counties (Dublin, Cork and Kerry). The formal pilot evaluation report is currently being completed, with an anticipated favourable outcome. Importantly over half of those who availed of the pilot service had not previously accessed STI/HIV testing suggesting that this model will significantly increase STI/HIV testing. An additional contract has been put in place with the service provider to extend the period of service provision to February 2022. A funding proposal has been developed by the SHCPP seeking to continue to roll-out a national free, integrated STI (including HIV) testing service in 2022.

Promotion of HIV testing

Increasing awareness of the need to test for HIV, as well as information on testing options, is an important aspect of increasing HIV testing. The SHCPP manages a range of initiatives and campaigns to promote HIV/STI testing with a key focus on gbMSM who are disproportionately affected by HIV and STIs.

The SHCPP has a funding relationship in place with Gay Health Network (GHN) and works in partnership with the organisation to develop communications initiatives for the community that promote HIV testing among this target audience; directing people to www.man2man.ie for further information.

Specific communications initiatives driving people to testing include:

- Social media messages about HIV/STI testing on digital channels. These are promoted across Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, Out of Home (OOH) and via relevant platforms such as Gay Community News magazine and Grindr. Further information on HIV/STI testing is available on the HSE-funded man2man website <https://man2man.ie>.
- HIV/STI testing promotional campaigns encouraging gbMSM to test for HIV and other STIs, including the *Get Your Bits Out for the Labs; Mind Your Bottom; and Something Up?* campaigns. These are regularly run on digital channels and in social venues, and perform well in terms of cut-through and awareness with the audience.

With regard to information on HIV testing for migrant communities, some of whom are affected by HIV, the SHCPP works in partnership with Cairdre to maintain the www.healthconnect app, which is available in a range of languages, and signposts people to sexual health information and services, including currently available HIV testing options.

HIV/STI Prevention


As well as promoting HIV testing, the SHCPP leads out on a number of campaigns and initiatives around HIV/STI prevention, which drive people to the comprehensive HSE website www.sexualwellbeing.ie

Venue-based communications campaigns are promoted in colleges and social nightlife venues, promoting consistent condom use among young adults. These include the 'Because' out-of-home poster and digital campaign reminding people to use a condom

every time they have sex and directing them to www.sexualwellbeing.ie for further information. This campaign is well recognised and well received by the target audience.

The SHCPP also distributes free condoms and sexual health information. We manage the National Condom Distribution Service, making free condoms and sexual health information available to organisations working with groups who are at an increased risk to HIV/STIs. One hundred and thirty- eight organisations across the country are registered with the service. https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-professionals/research/research-reports/ncds-2020_final-draft.pdf

Yours Sincerely



Maeve O'Brien

Interim Programme Lead

Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme