



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

1<sup>st</sup> November 2021

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan  
Dáil Éireann  
Leinster House  
Dublin 2.

Rannan na nOspideil Ghearmhíochaine  
Aonad 4A – Áras Dargan  
An Ceantar Theas  
An Bothar Mileata  
Cill Mhaighneann  
BÁC 8

Acute Operations  
Health Service Executive  
Unit 4A - The Dargan Building  
Heuston South Quarter  
Military Road  
Kilmainham  
Dublin 8.

**PQ 51266/21\* *To ask the Minister for Health the extent to which endoscopy facilities are sufficiently and readily available to ensure the minimisation of waiting lists; and if he will make a statement on the matter.***

Dear Deputy Durkan,

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 response.

## **Response**

Endoscopy services for adults and children are in place in close to 40 acute hospitals nationwide. Procedures take place in dedicated Endoscopy units in acute hospitals as well as in theatre facilities. Endoscopy units are designated areas of the hospital where Endoscopy is performed as a day case procedure. Endoscopy units typically have between two and six Endoscopy 'rooms' where procedures take place.

Since the onset of COVID-19 there has been significant impact in all scheduled care activities across Acute Services including Endoscopy services, this is in line with National guidance that has been issued initially at the onset of COVID and subsequent guidance which was issued by the Endoscopy Clinical Programme which is available at <https://hse-ie.libguides.com/c.php?g=679077&p=4866758>

The guidance outlines the measures that need to be undertaken to ensure safety for both patients and staff and varies depending on the type of appointment or treatment the patient is receiving.

These measures were implemented as services resumed in 2020 and they have affected patient pathways in a number of ways. In the latter part of 2020, as services adapted to new workflows and processes associated with providing care within a COVID environment, the number of patients treated began to increase. However, the number of patients being treated in the scheduled care pathway in the early part of

2021 has been affected by the latest surge in COVID-19 and the requirement to prioritise access for time critical and urgent care. The impact of COVID-19 on Endoscopy in 2020 and 2021 to date has been significant in terms of the requirement to curtail routine elective work particularly during periods of surge. Unit closures/reductions in service, staff redeployment and leave because of COVID have further strained services which have yet to return to pre-COVID performance.

Furthermore, the cyber-attack on the HSE in mid-May 2021 was significant in terms of the impact on Endoscopy services, which required a number of interim measures around patient management and recoding of patient information. These interim measures required workflow changes as a result of the ICT disruption, all Endoscopy units have now resumed normal workflows but there are administrative backlogs associated with this disruption.

Due to ongoing impact of COVID and the cyber-attack, as well as the year-on-year increase in demand for Endoscopy services, the HSE and Dept of Health have taken a strategic approach in 2021 to minimising the GI Endoscopy waiting list by rolling out specific initiatives aimed at reducing the waiting list and offering patients a greater choice of care pathways.

The Endoscopy Clinical Programme in collaboration with the HSE and Dept. of Health have developed a plan that seeks to maximise activity for those patients who are waiting the longest for access to scheduled care and those whose care, both urgent and non-urgent, that have been impacted by service challenges during the pandemic.

Additional funding is now approved for a range of initiatives including

- Increasing the use of private hospital Endoscopy facilities (NTPF commissioning) for patients who have been waiting greater than 6 months for an Endoscopy procedure.
- Recruitment of 29 specialist Endoscopy triage nurses who will triage referrals to ensure patients are prioritised and placed on the most appropriate care pathway. Recruitment of 16 of these nurses is already underway. Once the recruitment of all 29 nurses is complete, coupled with nurses already in post; every Endoscopy unit in Ireland will have a dedicated triage nurse.
- The use of faecal immunochemical tests or 'FIT tests' in GI Endoscopy services. This simple test can be taken by patients in their own home and the test is sent to a lab for analysis. The results of the test can help clinical teams in Endoscopy units prioritise patients who urgently require further treatment as well as indicate which patients can safely be removed from the waiting list. By completing the test at home, this reduces the need for patients to attend hospital and is particularly suited to periods of surge when levels of COVID transmission are high.
- Additional capsule Endoscopy services. Capsule Endoscopy is a specialist service whereby patients swallow a small pill that records images of the gastrointestinal tract. This type of procedure is particularly suitable for patients who would otherwise not be suitable to undergo a more invasive colonoscopy procedure. Capsule Endoscopy is now in place in four hospitals (Connolly, Mercy, Galway and Tallaght) with a further four services preparing to launch capsule Endoscopy service in the medium term.

- The use of Endoscopy units to perform procedures at weekends. Endoscopy services are typically funded to operate Monday to Friday. There is an opportunity to use facilities at weekends, subject to staff availability by combining local hospital staff with external staff. This approach has been successfully piloted in recent months in the Saolta University Healthcare Group and further roll out is expected to other Hospital Groups in the coming months. This provides patients with care closer to home, in the public system.

In spite of the COVID and Cyber impact, in 2021 the most recent activity data shows than compared to the same time last year (the end of August 2020 vs end of August 2021), national Endoscopy activity has increased by 20.5%. In addition, the Notational Waiting List from GI Endoscopy procedures has reduced from 34,605 at the end of September 2020 to 32,001 in 2021.

I trust that this answers your question.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Trish King', written over a horizontal line.

**Trish King**  
**General Manager**  
**Acute Operations**