



18 October 2021

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne TD
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ46741/21 To ask the Minister for Health if he will report on the BreastCheck website and the advice that was made available through that platform for women in view of the suspension of the BreastCheck service; and the information provided in relation to alternative measures that women could undertake during the Covid-19 restrictions.

PQ46742/21 To ask the Minister for Health the reason the BreastCheck website has now changed and appears to have been replaced by the HSE.

PQ46743/21 To ask the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the number of women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer in 2021 after their BreastCheck was cancelled in 2020 due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ46744/21 To ask the Minister for Health if the reason BreastCheck appointments were cancelled in 2020 was due to the redeployment of staff for Covid-19 related assistance who would have normally conducted the BreastCheck service; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ46745/21 To ask the Minister for Health if all BreastCheck appointments were cancelled in 2020; if BreastCheck appointments are now 12 months or more behind schedule; and the contingency plans that are in place to address the backlog in BreastCheck appointments.

PQ46746/21 To ask the Minister for Health the breakdown of those awaiting BreastCheck appointments by CHO area in tabular form.

PQ46747/21 To ask the Minister for Health the communication that was given to the women on the BreastCheck database in relation to the suspension of the service; the way they were communicated with; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ46252/21 To ask the Minister for Health if he will report on the suspension of BreastCheck screening services over the pandemic; and if a breakdown will be provided of cancelled appointments by CHO area in tabular form.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above eight Parliamentary Questions, which I will address by topic below. I trust you are amenable to this approach.

Pauses in breast screening in 2020 and 2021

BreastCheck, the National Screening Service's population health breast screening programme, was paused between March and end of October 2020, and again between January and March 2021, following Government and Public Health advice to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

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Population health screening programmes invite well people for screening. In 2020, when the health services came under huge pressure from COVID, achieving the balance between benefits and harms in screening became more complex. Inviting well women – many of whom were in the vulnerable age category - into a high-risk environment tipped the balance of harms against screening during this period.

We judged that our screening radiographers and radiologists provided more benefit to the health of women by supporting the symptomatic service, than by providing screening. For women who had no symptoms of cancer, the risk of acquiring COVID-19 while attending their screening appointment was considered greater than the risk posed by a delayed screen.

During the pause in breast screening services, BreastCheck staff were therefore temporarily redeployed into symptomatic and other services, including the response to COVID-19. Support was provided to assess and treat women who were at high risk of breast cancer, and whose hospital appointments had been delayed because of COVID-19.

This temporary redeployment of services enabled high-risk patients who had symptoms to be seen quicker, with the aim of improving the outcome of any diagnosis during a time when breast health resources were constrained. This cohort of symptomatic women has been shown to have a significantly higher rate of cancer, and more time-dependent diagnosis, than the screened cohort. For example, if we provide mammography to 1,000 healthy women we will pick up around seven cancers. If we provide mammography to 1,000 symptomatic women we will pick up around 100 cancers.

The pause in screening, along with COVID-19 infection control measures, which affect our capacity to screen, mean that women are waiting longer for their screening appointments.

We have lost nearly a year of screening time because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Appointments in this screening round (where we invite women for screening once every two years) are delayed by up to a year. This means that if a woman was due to be screened in 2020, we are aiming to invite her in 2021; if she was due to be screened in 2021, we will now aim to invite her in 2022.

For a time, Ireland will be more in line with England, which screens women every three years. We aim to return to screening women every two years as soon as possible. This is dependent on the situation with COVID-19 and restrictions continuing to ease.

To alleviate pressure on the existing system and to increase capacity, our clinics and mobile screening units are working hard to screen as many people as possible while adhering to COVID-19 safety protocols. Measures include:

- Completed staff vaccination programme
- Mobile vans and static units upgraded to meet infection control and physical distancing requirements.
- Staff use of PPE and social distancing observed in both static and mobile units.
- New text messaging system to manage appointments

We have three new mobile units are coming on-stream. The first is already screening in Roscommon, with the two further mobile units due to be operating by early 2022. We redeployed a Dublin unit to Donegal for seven weeks to increase screening rate in that county, in September and October this year.

Other ways that we are investigating to increase capacity include asking staff to work additional hours. We are actively recruiting staff, while noting that staff recruitment remains a global challenge in certain areas, most notably radiography. For example, in breast screening, it takes up to 15 years to train a radiologist and 10 years to train a radiographer.

We are asking all participants, including new entrants, to check their telephone details on the BreastCheck register so we can better manage appointment uptake through our text messaging system. They will receive a reminder text message from 'Swiftqueue' a few days before their appointment.

To help us screen as many people as possible, we are asking women to come for screening when invited, and if they can't come, to let us know so we can offer this appointment to another woman in their community.

The NSS does not have a report that pulls together the number of BreastCheck invitations or delays on a CHO basis.

Our verified data shows that the number of women who had a complete mammogram from January to December 2020 was approximately 56,000. Our annual target is to screen 185,000 women in the eligible population, so we had approximately 128,000 fewer participants in 2020 than we had planned, pre-COVID.

Our target number of complete mammograms in the first eight months of 2021 was reduced in line with COVID-19 infection control measures to 63,000. Our verified data shows we are ahead of this target with approximately 70,000 women during this period.

On average 15-20% of screening participants do not attend their breast screening appointments. BreastCheck appointments are booked two-to-four weeks in advance, and the number of cancelled appointments is low.

BreastCheck website and advice during the pauses

When the NSS took the decision to pause screening in March 2020, it developed a detailed plan to ensure that the public and stakeholders, including advocacy groups, healthcare professionals, government and the media had the most up-to-date information available. These groups perform an important role in communicating with the people we care for in screening about changes to our programmes.

The NSS issued regular updates to stakeholders, while updating the HSE and NSS websites, as well as our social media channels. During 2020, the BreastCheck.ie website received 229,000 visits; an increase of almost 30% on 2019.

Women whose routine screening appointments were cancelled were contacted directly by the BreastCheck programme.

In our updates to stakeholders during the pause in early 2021, we explained that:

- BreastCheck had delayed sending new invitations for screening temporarily at the height of the third wave of the pandemic.
- Women whose appointments were being cancelled were being notified by BreastCheck, and their appointments were being rescheduled.
- Women who were due follow-up assessments should attend on the day and time given.



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Our digital and social media campaigns continue to advise women that if they have symptoms, they should not wait for screening; they should see their GP immediately. We also advise on the symptoms to look out for.

The NSS managed concerns by responding directly to queries, including those from the parliamentary system and the media. Our BreastCheck clinical director gave direct information to women via radio interviews and RTÉ television news. Our helpline staff and unit staff were fully briefed to answer any questions women had about their routine screening invitation. Women were encouraged to contact the BreastCheck Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, or email info@breastcheck.ie

Changes to the BreastCheck website

Information about BreastCheck was moved to www.hse.ie on 14 May 2019, and was redesigned following the HSE content guidelines. This is in line with the HSE's digital roadmap to improve the citizen's online experience of the health service, and move away from individual standalone websites.

The move has significant benefits for citizens as they can find all the information relating to their health in one place, rather than on multiple websites. It also represents better value for money and enables improved compliance with accessibility legislation and GDPR, better search engine optimisation, and reduced spend on paid search campaigns, web development and hosting.

This is in line with the government's approach to the streamlining of public sector. The domain name 'breastcheck.ie' is still active, and brings visitors to the part of hse.ie where they can find information they need about the screening programme.

Breast Cancer Diagnosis Data

The NSS does not have data on breast cancers diagnosed in 2021. Questions about numbers of cancers diagnosed should be referred to National Cancer Registry Ireland (www.ncri.ie).

For other queries BreastCheck participants can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, email info@breastcheck.ie or contact their 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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