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1<sup>st</sup> March 2022

**Ref: PQ 7750-22**

**To ask the Minister for Health the estimated cost of making nicotine replacement therapy free of charge to all those enrolled in smoking cessation programmes; and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

Dear Deputy Mitchell,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to your above referenced parliamentary question. The question concerned was referred to the HSE Tobacco Free Ireland Programme, HSE Strategy and Research, for review and direct response.

Smoking cessation services are recognised as an important element of a comprehensive tobacco control strategy.<sup>1</sup> The HSE provides and promotes a wide range of cessation services, ranging from online on [www.quit.ie](http://www.quit.ie) and social media supports on [www.facebook.com/HSEquit](https://www.facebook.com/HSEquit), a National Smokers' QUITline 1800 201 203, face-to-face and group stop smoking supports provided by trained Stop Smoking Advisors.

The recent Healthy Ireland Survey Report (2021) tells us that 70% of those who quit in the last 12 months quit using willpower alone – this is the least effective method.<sup>2</sup> Evidence tells us that those who choose to use Stop Smoking Medications and Nicotine Replacement Therapies (NRT) in their quit

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Health, 2013. Tobacco Free Ireland – Report of the Tobacco Policy Review Group. (2013). Department of Health, Dublin, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> IPSOS MRBI, 2021. IPSOS MRBI/Department of Health. Healthy Ireland Survey 2021 - Summary of Findings. 2021.

attempt double their chances of quitting smoking. Furthermore, if a smoker engages with behavioural support (i.e. QUIT services) **and** uses stop smoking medications or NRT and manages to quit for 28 days, they are five times more likely to stay quit for good.

In 2017, HIQA conducted a Health Technology Assessment<sup>3</sup> of smoking cessation interventions;

- All pharmacological interventions included in the analysis were found to be effective and cost-effective when compared with unassisted quitting.
- HIQA advised that smoking cessation services should, in the first instance, seek to increase the uptake of Varenicline (alone or in combination with Nicotine Replacement Therapy) among smokers wishing to use some type of pharmacological support in their attempt to quit.
- Additionally, the provision of behavioural support, either alone or in combination with pharmacological interventions was reported to increase the chances of long-term smoking cessation and it should continue to be provided to all smokers who would like to avail of this option to help them quit.

National Stop Smoking Clinical Guidelines<sup>4</sup> (published in January 2022 by the Department of Health) have, for the first time, defined best practice care for people who smoke across a range of healthcare settings. They recommend that healthcare professionals:

- **Ask** about smoking status at every consultation and
- **Advise** on the best way to quit (which is using medication and our intensive service which provides behavioural support), and
- **Act** by 1) Recommending or prescribing stop smoking medication and 2) Referring to QUIT

Each year, the HSE QUIT Programme helps thousands of people who want to stop smoking. Some recent activity data for those who engaged with a stop smoking behavioural support programme are detailed below:

Year	Number offered support on at least 1 occasion
2020	7,098
2021* (provisional data)	8,655

Source: HSE Tobacco Free Ireland Programme, Feb 2022

Our historical service activity suggests that **approximately half** of those who engage with the QUIT service then enter a Standard Treatment Programme of care and set a quit date. Approximately, **half** of those who set a quit date will also use nicotine replacement therapy and/or stop smoking medications to help them quit, in addition to the behavioral support they receive from their professionally trained stop smoking advisor. (i.e. Scenario 2 below is the most likely scenario based on historical data).

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<sup>3</sup> HIQA, 2017. Health Information Quality Authority, (HIQA). Health Technology Assessment for Smoking Cessation Services in Ireland. Health Information Quality Authority (HIQA) 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Health, 2022. National Clinical Effectiveness Committee National Clinical Guideline No.28 – Stop Smoking Guideline. <https://assets.gov.ie/213408/b6353f3f-83b6-4d11-9af4-2ccbed1fd4ca.pdf>

However, there is a perception among many smokers that NRT/stop smoking medications is expensive and as a result many do not invest in this support to help them quit. Currently in Ireland, those who hold a medical card can avail of free NRT/Stop Smoking medications under the General Medical Services scheme but obviously have to attend their GP first and re-attend every 2 weeks for a further script which is both a barrier for the client, can cause delays in access and also can put further pressure on already stretched GP services.

NRT is not covered by the Drug Payments Scheme which is also a barrier in terms of access.

Clients who pay (privately) for their medications must pay for NRT/stop smoking medications. The HSE Tobacco Free Ireland Programme has obtained data for the average cost per person for NRT/Stop smoking medication reimbursed through the medical card/PCRS scheme. The average price in 2019 was €188/person and this represents the realised cost for NRT/stop smoking medications incorporating current dispensing rules and variability in adherence to the recommended 12 week course of medication.

### **Estimate of Cost of free NRT/Medication**

#### **Scenario 1 (All those enrolled in smoking cessation programmes using NRT/Medication)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number offered support on at least 1 occasion</b>	<b>Enrolled in cessation programme ALL using medication</b>	<b>€ Cost</b>
<b>2020</b>	7,098	3,549	€ 667,212
<b>2021</b>	8,655	4,328	€ 813,570

1. 50% of those who engage with the stop smoking behavioral support service (i.e. the QUIT Service) enter a Standard Treatment Programme of support where they will be followed up for a period of 12 months.
2. **ALL** will use NRT/Stop smoking medications.
3. Average cost per person is €188.

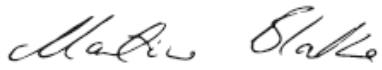
#### **Scenario 2 (50 % of those enrolled in smoking cessation programmes using NRT/Medication)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number offered support on at least 1 occasion</b>	<b>Enrolled in cessation programme HALF using medication</b>	<b>€ Cost</b>
<b>2020</b>	7,098	1,775	€ 333,606
<b>2021</b>	8,655	2,164	€ 406,785

1. 50% of those who engage with the stop smoking behavioral support service (i.e. the QUIT Service) enter a Standard Treatment Programme of support where they will be followed up for a period of 12 months.
2. **HALF** will use NRT/Stop smoking medications.
3. Average cost per person is €188.

The Department of Health-commissioned report *An Assessment of the Economic Cost of Smoking in Ireland*, published in 2016, estimated the annual cost to the health service as €460 million, and the total annual costs as €10.7 billion. In comparison, costs for providing NRT/stop smoking medications to all who engage with the QUIT services are relatively small <sup>5</sup> and as per the Department of Health commissioned HIQA report are highly cost effective.

Yours Sincerely,



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**Martina Blake**

Programme Lead,

HSE Tobacco Free Ireland Programme

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<sup>5</sup> ICF International, 2016. *An Assessment of the Economic Cost of Smoking in Ireland*. ICF International, London 2016