



25 May 2022

Deputy Róisín Shortall TD
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ24593.22: To ask the Minister for Health when he expects the Coombe to resume screening of cervical cancer samples; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ24594.22: To ask the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the National Cervical Screening Laboratory and the recruitment of staff; the steps he is taking to address the shortage of cytopathology staff; when he expects that all cervical cancer samples will be screened in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above two Parliamentary Questions, which I intend answering as one. I trust you are agreeable with this approach.

CervicalCheck - the national cervical screening programme, plays an important role in preventing cervical cancer in Ireland. The number of women who developed cervical cancer fell by 7% year-on-year between 2010 and 2015. More recent data shows that the decreasing incidence has been sustained even as the programme matures, with a 2.8% annual percentage decrease from 2010-2018. In the first ten years of the programme it provided almost 3.2 million cervical screening tests, and detected over 115,000 abnormalities (including 64,000 high grade abnormalities), many of which could have developed into cervical cancer if not detected through screening.

Coombe sample processing

Two quality-assured laboratories process all CervicalCheck tests. They are Quest Diagnostics in the USA, and the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital (CWIUH) in Dublin. They perform HPV primary testing and reflex cytology. A laboratory provider in the US is used because there are not enough quality-assured laboratories available in Ireland to meet our needs, and to ensure resilience in our system.

The CWIUH processes cervical screening samples for approximately 10% of CervicalCheck's community sample takers. In 2021, approximately 40,000 samples were processed at the CWIUH, while around 310,000 were sent to Quest Diagnostics in the USA.

The CWIUH lost connectivity with CervicalCheck as a result of the cyber-attack on the hospital in December 2021. It paused processing screening samples until the link could be restored.

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Connectivity is now restored and is being tested before sample processing resumes. A full restart plan is expected from the hospital in the coming weeks. In the interim period all samples are being processed by CervicalCheck's other contracted laboratory, Quest Diagnostics. We are grateful to our laboratory provider in the US for processing all samples during this period, ensuring we continue to meet our key performance indicator of getting result letters to women within four weeks in 90% of cases.

National Cervical Screening Laboratory

A strategic decision was made (arising from recommendations of the Dr Scally Report) in 2018 to develop a National Cervical Screening Laboratory (NCSL) in Ireland in conjunction with the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital (CWIUH) in Dublin. The new bespoke laboratory will comprise of 1,340 square metres of accommodation over four floors providing cytology, HPV testing, training, audit, and research facilities. Construction of the new laboratory is due to be completed in the second quarter of 2022. The laboratory is due to be operational in quarter three of 2022.

The opening of the new NCSL at the CWIUH (Coombe Women and Infant University Hospital) will build capacity and resilience into the public element of the laboratory services required for the national cervical screening programme in Ireland. The NCSL will enable the National Screening Service (NSS) to reduce its dependency on third party providers to meet the needs of CervicalCheck. The new laboratory is designed to become the principal provider of cervical screening laboratory services for the NSS.

Recruitment of staff

A key factor for the success of the NCSL is the availability and recruitment of cytopathology staff, namely consultant cytopathologists, in the face of increased market demand and the continued decline of the cytology industry in Ireland, the UK, and globally.

Work is ongoing with stakeholders across the health service to ensure workforce resilience in the medium to long term. This includes engagement with the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland's Faculty of Pathology to introduce a post-CSCST (Certificate of Satisfactory Completion of Specialist Training) fellowship, and include cervical cytology in the histopathology training curriculum.

There are 25.7 whole time equivalent staff employed across different disciplines to provide primary HPV screening and reporting of samples at the CWIUH. Further posts have been identified and staff will be recruited as the Coombe increases its work on behalf of CervicalCheck. This will be done in parallel with ongoing work around workforce resilience.

Samples screened in Ireland

Due to the staffing factors outlined above, it will take a number of years for the lab to operate at full capacity as the principal provider of cytology services to CervicalCheck. It is envisaged that a secondary provider will continue to be required to ensure resilience in the system at all times, as the cyber-attack against the Coombe, for example, has shown necessary.

As part of our work to promote a better understanding of the services we provide, we are making accurate information available to assist those writing and talking about our service and related issues. To assist in that purpose we have produced *A Guide to Talking About Cervical Screening in Ireland*, which you can access by clicking [here](#).





An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

For other queries, programme participants can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55; email: info@screeningservice.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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