



18 October 2022

Deputy Emer Higgins
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ48469.22: To ask the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to extending the free cervical screening service to women over 65 years who have previously had an abnormal result from a cervical smear test or who have been recommended to continue getting regular smears by their general practitioner; and if he will make a statement on the matter

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

Screening programmes are organised based on achieving a balance of the benefits and the potential harms of screening. In order to deliver a screening programme, the evidence has to show that screening is effective at reducing the rate of the condition being targeted within a defined group of people, and/ or reducing the death rate of that condition within that group. The incidence of the condition has to be high enough in the population to justify screening.

Ireland's cervical screening programme, CervicalCheck, moved to HPV cervical screening on 30 March 2020. The HPV test is a machine-based test that looks for the presence of HPV. If HPV is found, your test sample is checked for abnormal cells ('smear' test). The previous testing process looked for abnormal cells first. But finding HPV first is a better way to screen for cervical cancer.

The move to HPV cervical screening was informed by a 2017 Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) Health Technology Assessment report that focused on the human papillomavirus (HPV) - a virus which can cause cell changes that can lead to cancer. HIQA is an independent authority established to drive high-quality and safe care for people using health and social care services in Ireland.

HIQA recommended that CervicalCheck invite women and people with a cervix between the ages of 25 and 65 for cervical screening. Anyone outside of that age range is not eligible for free cervical screening. This is because evidence to date shows there to be no additional public health benefit in offering cervical screening to well women outside of this age range.

Any revisions to our screening programmes, such as changes to the age range, are considered by the National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC). This is an independent committee that advises the Minister and Department of Health on all new proposals for population-based screening programmes and revisions to existing programmes.

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National Screening Service

You can find more information about the NSAC [here](#), including information about how you can submit suggestions for changes to existing screening programmes through its annual call for submissions.

We cannot comment on individual cases, including individual GP treatment recommendations; however, we advise all people that screening is for well people who do not have symptoms. Anyone who has symptoms is advised to contact their GP immediately as their GP is best placed to advise on the appropriate care pathway for them.

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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