

18 October 2023

Deputy Bríd Smith
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ44251.23: To ask the Minister for Health if there are any plans to trial the use of curved paddles (details supplied) in the carrying out of mammograms given the high number of women who report pain and/or discomfort during breast screening; if he will consider that this may help improve the numbers returning for subsequent mammograms; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Details Supplied: SmartCurve

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

Number of women report pain or discomfort during breast screening

Across all our screening programmes, we work to deliver positive patient experiences. Our BreastCheck Patient Reported Experience Measures (PREMs) programme began in September this year to help us listen to and learn from women's experiences, understand what is working well, and identify areas where we can improve our screening programme. Our PREMs programme aims to be the largest patient experience survey ever conducted in a breast cancer screening programme worldwide.

In relation to pain/discomfort during screening, the PREMs programme to date has identified:

- 78.2% of respondents reported zero or mild discomfort, 18.7% moderate discomfort and only 4.1% severe discomfort.
- 99.7% of respondents reported that they intend to attend their next BreastCheck appointment.

This feedback from women demonstrates that discomfort does not have an adverse impact on a woman intending to attend screening again in the future. We aim to use the PREMs information to determine whether there are any quality improvement initiatives that can be identified to improve a woman's experience, that are supported by clinical evidence and deliver value for money.

Curved paddles

We work with women to determine what is the most appropriate paddle for the person receiving the mammogram. We use curved paddles in some of our screening centres. However, we have found that they are not suitable for all breast shapes and sizes.

There is a lack of independent research to support the standard use of curved paddles. Other screening programmes around the world have trialled curved paddles but do not routinely use them. In our experience, curved paddles have not had an impact on the number of women reporting discomfort or returning for screening when invited.

We understand that some women can experience discomfort for a short time during a mammogram. In our leaflet about the BreastCheck appointment, we explain: "A mammogram may hurt. The procedure takes a few minutes and during this time, pressure is applied to each

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breast. Some women find this uncomfortable or painful, but there is no evidence that the pressure harms the breasts. If you find the procedure excessively painful, please tell the radiographer immediately and they will stop.”

All screening programmes must balance the benefits and potential harms of screening. We aim to communicate those benefits and potential harms in an open and transparent way, to enable women to make an informed choice about screening.

I trust this information is of assistance to you, but should you have any further queries in relation our work, any please contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Murphy,
Chief Executive

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