



24 May 2022

Deputy Bríd Smith TD
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ24003.22: To ask the Minister for Health the policy in relation to Cervical Check services; if the system is changing in relation to the use of HPV testing; if so, the locations in which this testing will be carried out; if a competitive tendering will be arranged for this service; if he has plans to build up the university courses and qualification standards necessary to ensure that this service is conducted in the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

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.

HPV testing

Before March 2020, CervicalCheck used cytology screening, where the cells of the cervix (in the sample) were looked at under a microscope. This was a good test used internationally, and it reduced incidence and mortality from cervical cancer.

However, in March 2020, CervicalCheck introduced the HPV (human papillomavirus) test as the primary screening method for the detection of abnormal cervical cells which could develop into cervical cancer. This policy change was recommended in a report by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) in 2017, and was approved by the Department of Health. This brought the Irish cervical screening programme into line with international best practice in cervical screening.

HPV is a better test than cytology for identifying people at risk of having high-grade changes in the cells of the cervix. Under HPV cervical screening, if a sample tests positive for HPV, it is also tested for cell changes. If a person does not have HPV, their sample will not be looked at for cell changes. This is because it is unlikely that they will develop cervical cancer in the absence of HPV.

The HPV test is a more sensitive and accurate test than the cytology test. If, for example, 1,000 people are screened, about 20 people will have abnormal (pre-cancerous) cervical cells.

- Around 15 of these 20 people will have these cells found through a cytology test. Five people will not and may go on to develop cervical cancer.
- Around 18 of these 20 people will have these cells found through HPV cervical screening. Two people will not and may go on to develop cervical cancer.

There are no plans at present to make further changes in relation to the use of HPV testing.





Laboratory locations

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.

Normally, 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 is not currently processing cervical screening samples for CervicalCheck since the cyberattack at the CWIUH in December 2021. The cyber-attack on the hospital in December 2021 resulted in the hospital losing its IT connectivity with CervicalCheck. This resulted in the hospital being unable to accept samples.

The hospital recently restored its connectivity with CervicalCheck and this link is in the process of being tested. A full restart plan is expected from the Coombe in the coming weeks.

Until services resume at CWIUH, all samples are being processed by CervicalCheck's other contracted laboratory, Quest Diagnostics. We are grateful to our laboratory provider in the US for facilitating the processing of CWIUH samples during this period; and ensuring that we continue to meet our key performance indicator of getting result letters to women within four weeks in 90% of cases.

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 1,340sq m 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 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.

Competitive tendering

The current main cervical screening contract is held by Quest Diagnostics until December 2022. The procurement for this service was through the EU tendering process.

With the existing contract expiring this year, a new contract is therefore required to provide an alternative service for the next few years, and provide resilience for the service in the future. This is being progressed by the NSS.

The pre-qualification stage was published in February this year, and a shortlisting process has been completed. Meetings were held in early May, and it is expected that final tender





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submissions will be submitted by the end of June 2022. The tender process for the future has no impact on the current service for women.

It is likely that CervicalCheck will have a second provider for several years until the CWIUH can build a level of resilience and back-up to ensure a guaranteed service at all times for the programme.

A 'memorandum of understanding' in place with the CWIUH, as it is a public body.

University courses

A key factor for the immediate and long-term 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 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 RCPI (Royal College of Physicians of Ireland) 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.

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 are welcome to access in the Publications section of screeningservice.ie, or by clicking [here](#).

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
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An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Ciock
The National Breast Screening Programme



AN CLÁR NÁISIÚNTA SCAGTHÁSTÁLA CERIBHEACS
THE NATIONAL CERVICAL SCREENING PROGRAMME



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Puitéige
The National Bowel Screening Programme



An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Reataí do Dhiabaitigh
The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme