

An Roinn Sláinte
Department of Health
Secretary General



Ms Éilís Fallon
Committee Secretariat
Committee of Public Accounts
Leinster House
Dublin 2

Your Ref: PAC32-I-1270

5 March 2019

**Re: Information requested following Department of Health appearance before
the Committee of Public Accounts**

Dear Ms Fallon,

I refer to your letter of 25 January where you requested that information be supplied on the following:

- 1. A breakdown of the cost of services provided by laboratories.**
- 2. Further details in relation to the provision of out of cycle smear tests.**

I now provide, in the attached appendices, a note on items 1 and 2 above. I trust the information supplied meets the Committee's requirements.

I wish to take this opportunity to apologise for the delay in compiling the requested information which was undertaken in parallel with the management of a number of important and urgent issues related to the CervicalCheck programme. I want to assure Members that every effort has been made to provide the requested information as quickly as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Jim Breslin

Secretary General

Appendix 1

A breakdown of the cost of services provided by laboratories

On 28 April 2018, the Minister for Health made the decision to provide for a free out of cycle smear test for any woman who was concerned, where her GP felt she should have a further test as part of her reassurance.

On 11 December, I advised the Committee of costs associated with GP consultation fees and the taking of repeat smear tests associated with this decision. At that time I advised that the combination of GP consultations, smearing and laboratory costs were likely to be well within a total estimate of €10 million to year end.

The HSE has now advised that the figure for the out of cycle smear tests between 1st May and 31st December amounts to approximately €9.6m.

This figure is broken down into:

- Approximately 110,000 consultations at a cost of €5.4m
- Approximately 59,000 repeat smears taken at a cost of €2.9m
- A cytology cost of approximately €1.3m

Appendix 2

Further details in relation to the provision of out of cycle smear tests

From the transcript of the Committee's 17 January meeting, the second request is for clarification in relation to the timeframe in which women will be recalled following an out of cycle smear test. In previous correspondence, I noted that the future costs of providing smear tests would be offset to a degree by out of cycle smear tests.

The out of cycle smear tests seen by the programme last year were offered to any woman who was concerned, where her GP felt she should have a further test as part of her reassurance. This decision reflected the particular circumstances pertaining to that time, and in the normal course of the operation of the screening programme the provision of smear tests outside normal screening intervals would not take place.

Those out of cycle tests have now ceased, following the reassurance provided by Dr Gabriel Scally's Final Report in September, and the programme has returned to providing smear tests at the recommended intervals.

Dr Scally, in his Final Report of the Scoping Inquiry into the CervicalCheck Screening Programme, said that all screening programmes are a balance of benefit and disbenefit (i.e. harm). On the one hand, identifying a disease at an early stage usually allows for more effective treatment and its possible eradication. On the other, some screening procedures and subsequent investigations carry risks to the patient, such as a low-level radiation dose or damage from medical instruments. As noted by HIQA, screening programmes need to balance the risks in a trade-off between early effective treatment and avoiding harms relating to screening.¹

Women between the ages of 25 and 44 are offered screening by CervicalCheck at three yearly intervals, and women between the ages of 45 and 60 are offered screening at five yearly intervals. For example,

¹ Health Technology Assessment of Human Papillomavirus Testing as the Primary Screening Method for Prevention of Cervical Cancer, HIQA, May 2017

a 28 year old woman who had an out-of-cycle smear in October 2018 would have her next smear in October 2021, i.e. after an interval of three years, unless there is a need for an earlier screen determined in her case.