

Chair's Note
Meeting of the National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC)
Department of Health
20 October 2023

The National Screening Advisory Committee held its third meeting of 2023 on Friday, 20 October.

This was my first meeting as the newly appointed Chair of the Committee and I was glad to welcome everyone. This meeting also was the last for Dr Mary Codd, Prof. Sheelagh McGuinness, Ms Jillian van Turnhout, and Dr Ciaran O'Neill who have all concluded their terms. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to sincerely thank each of the outgoing members for their time and contributions.

Recommendation to the Minister for Health

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) presented their final Health Technology Assessment (HTA) of the addition of Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) to the National Newborn Bloodspot Screening Programme (NBS) to the Committee.

Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) is a rare genetic neuromuscular disorder, which can have very significant effects on children, including infant mortality and serious permanent disabilities such as walking and breathing difficulties. Newborn Bloodspot Screening for SMA is possible and has the potential to enable earlier identification and diagnosis, thereby facilitating earlier disease management and treatment.

The Committee, having considered the comprehensive HTA report and after an extensive discussion, decided to recommend to the Minister for Health that Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) should be added to the NBS Programme. The Minister approved the recommendation on 26 November 2023 and has asked the HSE to begin planning for implementation of SMA testing into the NBS Programme.

NSAC Annual Call 2021/2022

The Committee discussed the proposals for screening programmes received through the 2021 and 2022 Annual Calls regarding Familial Hypercholesterolemia and Genetic Hemochromatosis. After a careful consideration of both conditions and based on the evidence, the Committee agreed to recommend FH for an evidence review but not to recommend GH for inclusion in the HIQA work programme. Further consideration of this proposal is deferred, pending significant new evidence emerging.

Design of the Committee's third Annual Call, inviting members of the public and health professionals to make submissions on screening programmes in Ireland is being finalised and will be launched later this year.

Updated European Council Recommendation on cancer screening

The Secretariat updated the Committee on the recent engagement between the Department of Health with its European colleagues on the updated European Council Recommendation (2022) on cancer screening. The Committee also received updates on the ongoing European Pilots Projects concerning lung, gastric and prostate cancer screening. These were provided in writing by the leading Irish-based clinicians involved in each in advance of the meeting.

The Committee was informed that arising out of the updated European Council Recommendation, efforts are now underway to establish a 4-year Joint Action on cancer screening, titled EUCanScreen. Subject to approval of the application, which was submitted on 31 October 2023, this project will be funded under the European Commission's EU4Health programme. Irish involvement in this project will be coordinated through the Department of Health in partnership with the National Screening Service and Royal College of Surgeons Ireland (RCSI).

The Department of Health committed that it would continue to engage with colleagues at European and national level, providing updates to the Committee on the Joint Action and Pilot Projects as necessary.

NSAC Work Processes

At the meeting work also continued to progress on revising the Terms of Reference and Standing Orders of the Committee. HIQA also provided an update on their work programme for 2024 onwards, which will feature full HTA processes on reviewing the evidence for the expansion of the age range eligibility for the BowelScreen and BreastCheck screening programmes. These will be discussed again at the next meeting in December.

Next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee is scheduled for Friday, 8 December 2023.



Dr Suzanne Crowe
Chair, National Screening Advisory Committee