The National Cancer Screening Service is part of the Health Service Executive. It encompasses BreastCheck – The National Breast Screening Programme and CervicalCheck – The National Cervical Screening Programme, BowelScreen – The National Bowel Screening Programme and Diabetic RetinaScreen – The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme.
Foreword

The National Cancer Screening Service (NCSS) is part of the Health Service Executive (HSE) National Cancer Control Programme. The NCSS has significant experience in developing, implementing and delivering organised, population-based screening programmes.

The NCSS encompasses BreastCheck – The National Breast Screening Programme, CervicalCheck – The National Cervical Screening Programme, BowelScreen – The National Bowel Screening Programme and Diabetic RetinaScreen – The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme. When all four programmes are fully implemented, over two million people in Ireland will be eligible for at least one screening programme.

CervicalCheck was introduced in September 2008. At time of publication, the programme had completed its first five year round of screening and provided over 1.65 million smear tests to more than 900,000 women of all ages. Among those women screened in the first four years, 13,117 had pre-cancerous abnormalities detected and 464 cancers were detected.

Cervical screening is a preventative health measure. The primary objective of cervical screening is to reduce the mortality from cervical cancer by detecting and treating changes in the cells of the cervix, before they become cancer.

CervicalCheck provides free regular smear tests to over 1.1 million eligible women aged 25-60 every three or five years (depending on age). Over time, a successful national cervical screening programme in Ireland has the potential to significantly reduce mortality rates in the screened population by as much as 80 per cent. CervicalCheck has a minimum target participation rate of 80 per cent of eligible women.

No screening test is 100 per cent accurate. The value of a population-based screening programme, such as CervicalCheck, is in the repeat nature of the test.

Some women will remain part of the CervicalCheck programme for 35 years and can have 11 or more smear tests during this time. It is essential that these women remain confident in the service that CervicalCheck provides. Quality assurance is at the heart of the programme and dictates every aspect of the screening journey.

The ‘Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cervical Screening (second edition)’ is the result of a collaborative process encompassing the entire screening pathway – programme operation, primary care, cytopathology, HPV testing, colposcopy and histopathology. Rigorous adherence to, and continuous monitoring of the quality assurance requirements and standards outlined in this document are vital, and the cornerstone on which the programme is built.

Quality assurance is a continuous process. This document builds on the standards set in the first edition and reflects programme developments such as the introduction of HPV testing post-treatment at colposcopy.

We would like to thank all involved in developing these quality assurance requirements and standards for their time, expertise and commitment to delivering an internationally recognised cervical screening programme in Ireland. In particular, we thank the many thousands of women who have participated in, and supported the CervicalCheck programme since it commenced. Their continuing participation ensures the establishment of cervical screening as a routine feature of women’s healthcare in Ireland and in essence, the programme’s effectiveness.

Dr Susan O’Reilly
Director, National Cancer Control Programme

Ms Majella Byrne
Head of the National Cancer Screening Service
Preface

The National Cancer Screening Service (NCSS) Quality Assurance (QA) Committee for Cervical Screening was established to develop and monitor quality assurance as part of CervicalCheck – The National Cervical Screening Programme. The committee is responsible for reviewing international standards, recommending best practice, monitoring and evaluating achievement of the recommended standards and their adherence by service providers.

Regular cervical screening can reduce cervical cancer mortality. This is the goal of the CervicalCheck programme. While it is an ambitious goal, it is achievable. Quality assured screening, detection and treatment have ensured these women have been given the highest possible level of care. Continuing adherence to, and development of quality assured care will enable CervicalCheck to achieve its goal into the future.

This second edition of ‘Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cervical Screening’ has been developed to support and measure the programme as it establishes itself as a vital and integral element of the healthcare landscape in Ireland.

A set of quality assurance requirements and standards are presented for each element of the programme. Ensuring quality assurance in service delivery comprises compliance with both quality requirements and quality standards.

There are over 1.1 million women aged 25-60 in Ireland who are eligible for the CervicalCheck programme. It is incumbent upon all involved in delivering the programme to adhere to the requirements and standards outlined.

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