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Ireland

Minister Lacunhas First National Electronic GP Referral System

The Minister for Health, Dr James Reilly TD launched Ireland's first national electronic GP referral system on Friday 27 January. A joint collaboration between the National Cancer Control Programme and the Irish College of General Practitioners, the new system is already in use with over 4,000 patients referred into breast, prostate and lung rapid access services in the designated cancer centres last year through the electronic process.

Aiming to eliminate the use of GP letters and faxes for the purpose of referring patients, the new system is already increasing efficiency and improving the experience for the patient.

With over 42,000 referrals into the NCCP breast, prostate and lung rapid access clinics annually, the addition of an online system provides GPs swift and safe access to the designated cancer centres.

For the NCCP, the development of the GP referral process has been an important feature in the ongoing work of the programme. The NCCP initially developed a suite of national referral guidelines and forms for a range of specific cancer types in conjunction with GPs and Consultants.

However, in recognition of the focus placed on the development of information systems by the 2006 National Cancer Strategy, and knowing the very real advantages of moving to online systems, the NCCP also moved to develop an online referral process.

The objective was to develop an online system for GPs to allow them to refer patients directly into the designated cancer centres. In collaboration with a broad range of medical professional and representative bodies, the NCCP began developing electronic cancer referral processes for breast, prostate and lung cancer in 2008.

The groups involved with the NCCP in this project were the Irish College of General Practitioners, the National Healthlink Project, the HSE ICT Directorate and the GPIT group (Part of the ICGP).

The project was delivered in two phases – the first involved the development of site specific cancer referral forms via Healthlink (who provide an electronic messaging service to GPs in over 900 practices). Referral guidelines and forms already developed were adapted for online use by Healthlink. Phase two involved the development of direct referral to the cancer services via the four ICGP accredited GP practice management software systems (Complete GP, Helix Practice Manager, Health One and Socrates) ,

Having started with breast cancer referrals, the NCCP subsequently moved to make prostate and lung cancer referrals available online. By the end of 2011, approximately 10% of all referrals were being carried out online. Within the twelve month period from January to December last year, over 4,000 referrals nationally in breast, prostate and lung cancer had been completed online.

The electronic system establishes a direct online link between each GP practice and the designated cancer centre. The swiftness of the process means the GP does not have any paperwork to complete, post or fax. The entire process is carried out online with the patient present. With an automated receipt facility, the GP knows for certain that the referral has been received and that their patient will be offered an appointment within the appropriate timeframe. It clearly reduces the risk of communication difficulties or issues and eliminates an element of cost.

Overall, it allows for a streamlining of the cancer referral process. It provides for greater efficiency in providing rapid access for patients – especially for those urgent patients being seen within two weeks of referral. As a result it allows for a greater number of patients being diagnosed at an early stage and maximises the potential for cure.

For more information, please visit: www.hse.ie

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