

## Addressing challenges to cancer control in Ireland due to the Covid-19 pandemic

Triona (Caitriona) McCarthy

T McCarthy<sup>1</sup>, H Burns<sup>1</sup>, A Lyng<sup>1</sup>, L Mullen<sup>1</sup>, E O'Toole<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National Cancer Control Programme, HSE, Dublin, Ireland  
Contact: triona.mccarthy@cancercontrol.ie

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a wide range of challenges to cancer control. People with possible symptoms of cancer were considered less likely to present for investigation. Patients with cancer were concerned about increased risk of illness or death from this novel virus. Cancer services had to ensure continued delivery of time-sensitive care. Public health skills and leadership have been key to Ireland's National Cancer Control Programme's COVID response. The multi-disciplinary skill set within the Programme includes an understanding of health protection principles, experience in rapid service redesign, monitoring of service delivery, patient and public communication, advocacy and guidance development, all of which have been integral to the pandemic response. Specific areas addressed include: rapid turnaround of guidance documents for cancer services, to minimise Covid-19 risk; patient information materials for those on treatment or with a history of cancer; development of novel service delivery mechanisms, such as a virtual national psycho-oncology service; a media campaign to combat decreased presentations with possible cancer and to reassure those currently on treatment; development of pre-surgical cocooning guidance and testing pathway; advocating for prioritisation of time-sensitive cancer diagnosis and treatment, and the wider health & wellbeing needs of those cocooning; advocating for and supporting the implementation of priority vaccination for those undergoing cancer treatment. Cross-sectoral collaboration has been facilitated by existing networks and relationships, allowing rapid responses to be deployed and actioned. The leaner guidance development process employed during the pandemic enabled timely response. A two-way communication system with cancer services allowed swift cascade of information and gathering of intelligence which empowered action. Learning from the cancer setting was transferable to other high-risk groups.

### Key messages:

- The potential impact of the pandemic on non-COVID care was far reaching, including at all stages of the cancer patient journey, from pre-diagnosis to living with or beyond cancer.
- The programmatic approach to cancer control in Ireland facilitated concerted efforts to respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic.