

Vaughan Gething AC/AM
Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref VG/08790/19

Janet Finch-Saunders AM
Chair, Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Government.Committee.Business@gov.wales

15 January 2019

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter of 6 December on behalf of the Petitions Committee about petition P-05-936 Offer Bowel Cancer Screening After the age of 74.

In terms of population screening, the UK National Screening Committee (UKNSC) advises Ministers in the four UK countries about how to deliver these programmes. It brings academic rigour and authority to what is an extremely complex area and is a world leader in its field. On the balance of the available evidence, the UKNSC does not recommend bowel screening beyond 74 years of age. Population screening is not without risks so there needs to be a balance between the benefits and harms of the screening test being offered. For asymptomatic bowel screening above the recommended age group, the additional risks from false positive results and any follow-up investigations outweigh the potential benefits in an older population.

Our policy in Wales is to only implement screening that is evidence based and has been recommended by the UKNSC. The UKNSC recommends bowel screening between the ages of 50 and 74 and has not provided a recommendation on screening for people over 74. Going beyond the advice of the Committee by implementing something that has not been recommended, and for which there is no evidence of more benefit than harm, is not a safe or prudent way to deliver health services.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Gohebiaeth.Vaughan.Gething@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Vaughan.Gething@gov.wales

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

I am aware that self-referral into the bowel screening programme over the age of 74 is allowed in England and Scotland. However, bowel screening programmes in the majority of countries only provide bowel screening up to the age of 74 and do not allow self-referral beyond this age for the same reasons that the Welsh programme does not. Northern Ireland, New Zealand and Australia do not allow self-referral over 74. In the USA and Canada, self-referral is not permitted beyond 75 but people can be assessed by their GP on an individual basis and offered a one-off screen if considered appropriate but only up to the age of 85, after which screening is not permitted. This position is not dissimilar to the current position in Wales as anyone over the age of 74 can discuss their concerns with their GP who will decide whether further investigation is needed. Anyone with symptoms of bowel cancer should be referred for rapid investigation under the urgent suspect cancer referral process.

The Welsh Government has recently committed to expand the programme to include men and women aged 50-59 by 2023. The risk of bowel cancer increases sharply from the age of 50 and the evidence shows that screening people in this age group would enable more bowel cancers to be picked up at an earlier stage, when treatment is likely to be more effective and survival chances improved.

Additionally, since January 2019, Bowel Screening Wales has been providing new faecal immunochemical testing (FIT) as part of the routine screening programme. As well as being more accurate, the new test is easier for people to use and evidence shows it will improve uptake in the screening programme. We also intend to gradually increase the sensitivity of this new test over the next four years so that more cancers can be detected.

I recognise that there is inequity of service provision between the UK countries and that some people would like to continue to participate in the screening programme beyond the age of 74. However, all screening programmes have the potential to do harm. The benefit to patients and their safety should be paramount in any decision to provide screening.

The Wales Screening Committee (WSC) considered the Welsh Government's policy position not to offer bowel screening self-referral to those over 74 years of age in November 2019. The Committee agreed that clarification on the UKNSC position was needed before further considering self-referral for those over 74. The Chair of WSC has written to the Chair of the UKNSC requesting this clarity. In the meantime the focus should be on rolling out screening to those aged 50 to 59 for which there is evidence of benefit and increasing the sensitivity of the screening test. Should the UKNSC recommend self-referral for people over 74 or a change to the upper age limit, we will consider how this can be delivered in Wales.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vaughan Gething". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vaughan Gething AC/AM

Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services