

PRESS RELEASE

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Record Number of Women Attended for Smear Tests in 2009

– Well Woman Launches Annual Report –

The Dublin Well Woman Centres has said that 'a free and accessible' cervical cancer screening programme is the most effective way to ensure women attend for regular smear tests. Introduction of restricted access to the National Cervical Screening Programme during the latter part of 2009 impacted negatively on smear test take-up at the time of transition, according to the organisation.

Launching its 2009 Annual Report today (28.06.10), Well Woman said it experienced a record number of women attending for smear tests in the first half of last year, but there was a marked drop in smears taken from September through the end of the year, when changes were made to CervicalCheck, the National Cervical Screening Programme.

When CervicalCheck was launched two years ago, women in the 25 to 60 age-bracket were able to avail of free smear testing. They simply had to make an appointment with any registered smear-taker. However, CervicalCheck changed its policy last September, and only women in receipt of an 'invitation letter' can now access a free test.

According to Well Woman's Chief Executive, Alison Begas: "The change in the National Cervical Screening Programme from a free and accessible model to a much more restrictive one resulted in a dramatic drop in the numbers attending for cervical screening in the latter part of 2009. We started 2009 with an unprecedented demand for cervical screening. This demand was – in part – due to a significant advertising campaign by CervicalCheck. The other major factor in driving women for screening was the death from cervical cancer of UK celebrity, Jade Goody."

In March 2009, Well Woman's three clinics – which are all based in Dublin - saw over 1,335 women for smear tests. Six months later – when CervicalCheck changed its policy – Well Woman saw 322 women for smear tests. Overall last year, Well Woman experienced a 15 per cent increase in the number of patients who had cervical smear tests taken, compared with the average number for the previous seven years.

"Leaving aside the 'Jade Goody factor', our experience is that women – who ordinarily did not prioritise attending for a regular smear – felt encouraged to do so when CervicalCheck offered a freely available programme. Indeed, from the women who attended for smears in 2009, a higher number than usual had to be referred for a colposcopy because of smear abnormalities. It is unfortunate that CervicalCheck now operates solely on a pre-registration basis and we hope - in the interests of women's long-term health - that this change can be revisited," Ms Begas said.

Well Woman saw an increase in referral rate across for colposcopy across all age groups in 2009. A colposcopy is an investigative test which looks at the cervix under a high powered microscope. It is provided in hospital gynaecological clinics.

According to Well Woman, there was an increase in colposcopy referral rate across all age groups; in the 25 to 29 age-group there was a 40 per cent increase in colposcopy referral rate, while the increase in the 45 to 49 age-group was 60 per cent on the previous year. "If these increases were extrapolated nationally, it

would have resulted in 5,000 additional colposcopy referrals being needed in 2009. Factors in the increased colposcopy referral rate may relate to a change in the laboratory used by the screening programme, new governing guidelines that are now in place in CervicalCheck, or the fact that more at-risk groups are now attending for a smear test," said Ms Begas.

HPV Vaccination

Following a decision in November 2008 by the Minister for Health and Children, Mary Harney TD, to suspend plans for the roll-out of the HPV vaccination programme, Well Woman embarked on a programme to vaccinate 12-year-old girls in the Coolock catchment area during 2009. Well Woman operates a clinic in Coolock, and it has established that women within the local community had a higher than average risk of an abnormal smear result, due to health and lifestyle factors.

Under the vaccination programme – run in conjunction with GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) – Well Woman was successful in giving the full vaccination course to 228 girls by the end of 2009; a further 35 girls were in the process of completing the course in early 2010, while a small number defaulted from receiving all three injections. The cost of the vaccination to each girl – which was €240 for the full course - was minimised by reducing the administration and clinical fee, and GSK donated a number of the vaccines for this special Well Woman initiative.

According to Alison Begas: "The most recent Census data suggests that there are 450 12-year-old girls living in the Coolock area. This means that our vaccination programme reached 60 per cent of our target group. This rate compares very favourably to vaccination programmes in some other countries. It demonstrates that parents want their children to be protected from cervical cancer, and we very much welcome the decision by the Minister for Health to initiate a free HPV vaccination programme for first-year girls, which is due to go national this coming September."

Pregnancy Services

Well Woman continued to deliver a non-judgmental pregnancy counselling service in 2009, offering information on adoption, parenting and abortion.

A key issue that emerged in Well Woman in the delivery of its pregnancy counselling service was the number of women attending who cited 'financial concerns' as a reason why they felt unable to continue their pregnancy.

According to Ms Begas: "Financial pressures became a frequently cited reason as to why women felt they could not continue with a crisis pregnancy. During our pregnancy counselling sessions, many women raised concerns about income security, including salary cuts and unemployment. Women clearly wish to provide sufficiently for their present family and household requirements, and a crisis pregnancy has become an increasing source of stress for those with income pressures."

STI Testing

The number of clients attending Well Woman for full STI screening saw a marked drop in 2009. Screening is offered at all of Well Woman's three clinics, and is available to men at its Pembroke Road clinic. Screening involves blood and swab tests to check for sexually transmitted infections such as Chlamydia, HIV and Hepatitis B and C.

The fall-off in demand for STI testing was, according to Well Woman, the impact of the down-turn on people's financial capacity. "The numbers attending for STI testing has fallen by about one-third since they peaked in 2007. This is more likely a reflection of people's more limited spending power than a behavioural change. In the national context, reduced testing means a lower detection and treatment rate. Ultimately, this exposes more sexually active people to the risk of contracting an STI.

“STI testing is comparatively more expensive than other sexual and reproductive services on offer at Well Woman. The reason for this is that considerable time and overheads are incurred in taking the samples, analysing them and collating the results. While price may now be emerging as an inhibitor to some people who could benefit from STI testing, the long-term health consequences for them could be very serious,” warned Ms Begas.

General

Well Woman celebrated its 31st birthday in 2009, and this was marked by a redevelopment of its clinic at Pembroke Road. In addition, it launched a new website www.wellwomancentre.ie, as well as the ‘Seven Ages’ programme, to highlight the fact that it offers lifetime healthcare to women, starting from their teens right into older-age.

ENDS.

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Note to Editors

The Well Woman Centres were founded in 1978 with the aim of helping women access family planning information and services at a time when contraception was illegal. Throughout the 1980s, Well Woman campaigned for the right to provide information to women facing crisis pregnancy and, in the 1990s, it won a landmark case at the European Court of Human Rights.

Well Woman now provides a full range of sexual health services, family planning and other primary care services to both men and women.

It has three centres in Dublin, based in Liffey Street, Pembroke Road and Coolock.

Well Woman is a registered charity.