



RE: Op-ed from Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly: Expansion of Free Contraception Scheme

01 September 2023

Ireland today is a very different country to the one of 1971 when groups of courageous women smuggled contraceptives on the “condom train” from Belfast.

As a society, we have thankfully progressed from the era when contraception was, at first, illegal, and from 1979, only available through GPs and “for bona fide family planning purposes”. Today’s adults of reproductive age are just one generation removed from those who were, until 1985, restricted from purchasing condoms over-the-counter.

Much has been achieved in women’s rights in the intervening decades, but this progress has not always been reflected in the provision of women’s health services. We heard the voices of women, and society in general, loud and clear in the referendum on repeal of the 8th Amendment to the Constitution in 2018 which enabled the provision of termination of pregnancy services. Arising from this result, the Government committed to the introduction of free contraception as recommended by the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution.

The Department of Health built on momentum by conducting its own listening exercise, inviting women to help shape policy development through their shared experiences of healthcare in Ireland. This led to the Women’s Health Action Plan which I launched last year, and which included a commitment to introduce free contraception.

We delivered on this promise last September in a landmark development with the launch of the free contraception scheme for women aged 17-25. Earlier this year it was expanded to include women aged 26, and from today it is available to all women, ordinarily resident in Ireland, aged 17 to 30.



We cannot under-estimate the importance of this measure, which gives women the freedom to control their reproductive health while removing financial barriers. The most suitable contraception isn't always the cheapest, so this scheme empowers women to choose the method most suited to their needs and lifestyle, with the assistance of free consultations with their GP or other medical professional.

Aside from being a family planning tool, prescription contraception is also widely used for treating painful periods, heavy bleeding and issues with mood that can accompany the latter half of the menstrual cycle for many. This is a serious issue: our Healthy Ireland survey reports that 51% of women experience disruption to activities of daily living, on occasion, as a result of symptoms related to their periods. The costs associated with managing these symptoms are now removed for women in the eligible age group.

Demand for the service is clear. So far, almost 2,400 GPs and 1,950 pharmacies have signed up, and tens of thousands of women have accessed it each month.

The scheme also covers the cost of prescriptions and, where relevant, fitting, removal and checks for Long-Acting Reversible Contraception devices such as the coil. Women, regardless of their financial circumstances, are benefitting from an equitable system that prioritises a high standard of healthcare and eliminates cost as an issue. This is particularly significant in the context of the current cost-of-living crisis, given that the initial costs of prescription contraception are typically higher and disproportionately faced by women.

It is not, however, an isolated measure aimed simply at ticking boxes on women's health issues. It's important to note that the contraception offered through the scheme doesn't protect against sexually transmitted infections. The National Condom Distribution Scheme therefore provides very valuable support for the sexual and reproductive health of men and their partners.



It supplies free condoms to the national network of STI clinics, to NGOs and services working with high-risk groups, and on participating 3rd level campuses. The NCDS is also supplying free condoms with orders from Ireland's new online STI testing scheme, which was launched in late 2022.

These measures are part of a growing suite of sexual health services which respond to population needs, reducing crisis pregnancy and termination of pregnancy rates, supporting STI prevention and treatment as well as addressing the growing need for services in gynaecology, menopause, fertility and menstrual health.

In the last two years we've seen enormous expansion in this area, with a network of new menopause clinics, endometriosis hubs, fertility hubs and period poverty initiatives and the expansion of the network of "see and treat" gynaecology clinics.

Later this month, the first publicly-funded IVF (in-vitro fertilisation) treatment will commence, offering thousands of couples an opportunity to create a family by removing the significant, often prohibitive, costs associated with this treatment.

All of these services form part of a jigsaw of a comprehensive, integrated system that provides quality healthcare for women throughout all life stages.

We may not yet have all the pieces in place, but I'm committed to building on our work to date to ensure the evolution of a fully equitable service for all.