

STATEMENT BY THE GSLP/LIBERAL OPPOSITION

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The suspension of one radiologist and the sacking of another along with the delays experienced in recruiting a third is yet another blow to the setting up of a structured, routine mammography service that the Opposition has been pressing for over many years. In the meantime, there are women out there who will continue to be at risk in the absence of such a service.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (World Health Organisation) concluded as far back as 2002 that mammography screening can reduce deaths from breast cancer. At that time a group of 24 experts from 11 countries agreed that there was sufficient evidence provided by clinical trials which proved the efficacy of mammography screening of women between 50 and 69 years. The reduction in the mortality rate from breast cancer among women who chose to participate in screening programmes was estimated to be about 35%. It was also established that organised screening for breast cancer was far more effective in reducing the death rate than sporadic screening.

In Gibraltar there is still no structured, routine mammography service offered to all women as a matter of course. In the United Kingdom, there are around 80 breast screening units each of which invite a defined population of eligible women aged 50 to 70 to be screened. It was announced in December 2007 that by 2012 the programme would be extended to cover women between the ages of 47 and 73. The estimate in the UK is that more than 19 million women have been screened and 117,000 cancers have been detected savings hundreds of lives in the process.

It is incredible that the Gibraltar Government has still not been able to get its act together on this issue even though they have had since 2002 to do so after the international working group reported its findings on the efficacy of breast cancer screening programmes. The concern among many people locally is that this delay could cause lives to be lost as breast cancers go undetected.

In answer to questions in Parliament from Shadow Health Minister Neil Costa, the Opposition were first told in September 2008 that an extra radiologist, who would start work in January 2009, had been recruited for this purpose. Neither the service nor the radiologist materialised at the time. In June 2009 Mr Costa pressed the Government again and was told that the routine mammography service would start as soon as a third radiologist had been recruited and that this process was underway. In October 2009 when he raised the matter yet again, he was told that the GHA were then in negotiations with a Consultant Radiologist in finalising the terms and conditions of his offer of appointment and that the proposed commencement date was now January 2010. When the issue was raised in Parliament again in February of this year, the Opposition was told that a third

radiologist had commenced employment in January for a period of two months on a locum basis, and that following the successful completion of this period he would be offered a contract. A pilot breast screening programme was expected to commence in the spring of 2010.

Commenting on the matter, Shadow Health Minister Neil Costa said: “The Government really have to get their act together on this one. The longer they take to establish the service, the longer that the women of Gibraltar will be deprived of its obvious benefits. Given that one radiologist has been suspended and another has been sacked, it is now a case of going back to square one. The time that the Government have taken to set up the service in the first place is totally unacceptable. The debate on the effectiveness of a routine structured mammography service was closed in 2002 by the research presented by the World Health Organisation. The Government have not done enough in all this time to bring Gibraltar in line with international recommendations.”