

STATEMENT BY THE GSLP/LIBERAL OPPOSITION 72/2010

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The attention of the Opposition has been drawn to the equipment that the Government has purchased for use with the standard, routine mammography service once this is in operation.

The Government confirmed to Parliament earlier this year that the equipment that will be used to provide the routine, structured, mammography service will not use MRI technology. Instead a traditional mammography machine, which uses digital x-rays to image breast tissue, has been purchased at a cost of over 370,000 euros. The old mammography equipment used until the new one was set up was purchased in November 2004 and was a Philips model which cost £50,784.

The Opposition understands that the results of clinical trials in Germany published earlier this year have shown that MRI used alone was significantly more sensitive (93%) than either mammography or ultrasound alone, or in combination, in cancer detection. The sample group consisted of 687 women with a lifetime risk of developing breast cancer of 20% or greater. During the study, 27 women were diagnosed with breast cancer. Overall, 2 of these cancers were diagnosed with mammography alone, none were diagnosed with ultrasound alone and 14 were diagnosed by MRI alone.

The researchers concluded that using mammography, an ultrasound examination, or clinical breast examination does not increase the cancer yield compared with what is achieved with MRI alone. They determined that existing guidelines for young women at high and moderate risk for breast cancer needed to be revised as a result of the study.

It is not known whether the GHA looked at the different technological options available to them before taking the decision on the equipment that was going to be purchased for use locally. The earliest type of breast cancer is called DCIS (Stage 0). This is found only in the milk duct where the cancer started and it can be small and difficult to see on a routine screening mammogram. Given its small size, it usually cannot be felt during a breast self-examination. MRI has been found to be better than mammography at finding DCIS. Although DCIS is non-invasive, it is sometimes labelled pre-cancerous since it is associated with an increased risk of invasive breast cancer as well as cancer that spreads beyond the breast. It is obvious that early diagnosis and treatment of DCIS reduces the risk of invasive cancer in the future.

Commenting on the matter, Shadow Health Minister Neil Costa said: "There has been considerable debate in the medial community as to the advantages and disadvantages of MRI over standard mammography. It is clear from the studies that the Opposition has looked at that MRI technology is better than mammography in certain women particularly those at high risk for breast cancer. It is also clear that MRI can detect cancers that may be missed in a routine mammogram and conversely if nothing is found by MRI then there is nothing there. The only issue from the evidence looked at is that at times on certain women it may prove too sensitive.

However, the possibility of having a choice of mammography or MRI available to a doctor within the structure of a routine mammography service is something that has not been mentioned by the Government. This is something that could be seriously considered given that lives can be saved through the proven advantages of MRI technology in such cases."