



Department
of Health &
Social Care

Steve Brine MP

Chair of the Health and Social Care Select Committee

From Rt. Hon Andrew Stephenson CBE MP
Minister of State for Health and Secondary Care

Tuesday 5th March 2024

Dear Steve,

Women with Very High Risk of breast cancer not called for annual testing

I am writing to you as the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee to inform you of an issue NHS England are currently dealing with.

On Monday 4th March, NHS England wrote to a group of women who are at Very High Risk of breast cancer who have been eligible for annual MRI checks, but who may not have been routinely referred to the annual tests recommended in NHS guidance.

This is an historic cohort of women who from 1962 to 2003 received radiotherapy treatment above the waist to treat Hodgkin lymphoma. Because of their treatment, this group were at an increased risk of breast cancer and therefore in 2003, clinicians were asked to contact both previous and current patients to refer them for annual checks. Women do not start annual MRI testing immediately following treatment – but between 8 and 15 years after treatment depending on their age at the time they were treated.

A number of women who were eligible for more regular ‘annual’ testing did not receive it. This was due to variable referral processes. To rectify this, specialists set up a database to identify how people were referred onto the Very High Risk pathway for breast screening. Details of the missed group were shared with NHS England in late September 2023, and they have since analysed data to triangulate information about clinical history, current status and residency in order to identify the individuals in the affected cohorts. Ministers were notified in February 2024.

We have overseen a system that has resulted in the identification of these Very High Risk women and now we are taking the appropriate action. This week, NHS England has written to 1487 women whom they have identified as not currently on the correct Very High-Risk pathway to receive annual MRI testing. This cohort will now be urgently offered an MRI follow up and inclusion in the Very High Risk pathway. We expect all women to be offered a scan within the next three months.

The specialist team have also identified a much smaller historic group whose details are currently being verified and they will be written to in the coming weeks.

NHS England has set up a helpline for affected women, the details of which will be included in letters sent to them. More widely, NHS England will undertake a review of the process that refers these women into the most appropriate service for their risk to mitigate any future impact of this issue.

We have informed parliament of the issue via a Written Ministerial Statement on Tuesday 5th March. Further details of this issue can be found in a letter from NHS England to the DHSC Secretary of State which has been attached to the Written Ministerial Statement and will be deposited in the Library.

We will of course keep the Select Committee updated with any further information that is received from NHS England including mitigations to prevent this happening in the future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Stephenson', is centered on the page.

Rt. Hon Andrew Stephenson CBE MP

Minister of State Health and Secondary Care