



Dr Mairead O'Connor, University College Cork, National University of Ireland, Cork, Ireland

Institution: Queen Mary, University of London, London, United Kingdom

Acquiring skills and capacity to examine women's acceptability of HPV self-sampling as an approach to cervical cancer screening in Ireland

Abstract

Cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer in women. Recent estimates show the number of new cases of cervical cancer in 2020 to be 604,127. This cancer is a highly preventable disease due to HPV vaccination and cervical screening. Well-organised cervical screening is effective and successful in reducing cervical cancer incidence and mortality in the population. However, this success is predicated on achieving high uptake. In a number of developed countries with organised screening programmes, coverage is falling. In Ireland, the cervical screening programme is facing two major challenges that could negatively impact the high coverage the programme previously achieved: (1) the number of cervical cancer screenings is down by over 50% compared to last year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. (2) Anecdotal evidence suggests that recent adverse high-profile publicity related to the screening programme has generated distress and confusion among women – particularly in relation to confusion around the purpose of cancer screening. In addition to these challenges, there are 'hard to reach' subgroups of the population who never attend for screening and those who attend intermittently.

HPV self-sampling may help combat these issues and interest in self-sampling for non-attenders is garnering interest in Ireland. The recent roll out of primary HPV testing in place of cytology testing within the Irish screening programme makes the possibility of offering HPV-self sampling to non-attenders more achievable.

If self-sampling is to be considered as an option in the future for women in Ireland, understanding women's views on, and acceptability of the method(s) is imperative for its success. Various studies on acceptability of HPV self-sampling among women have been conducted in countries across the world. However, no research on psychosocial issues in HPV self-sampling and acceptability of this screening method have been carried out in Ireland. This fellowship will build capacity in this evolving area and draw on the expertise of the host institute to equip the candidate with skills and knowledge to begin to address these issues in Ireland. In particular, the project aims to foster expertise on using behavioural science necessary to explore the acceptability of, and psychosocial impact of HPV self-sampling among women who undergo cervical screening in Ireland.