

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



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Your Ref:

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Dear *Claire + Jim,*

Thank you for your correspondence of 11 May 2021 in relation to the eradication of HIV by 2030.

Firstly I should affirm that my Department is committed to reducing the number of new HIV cases and aspires to end new HIV cases here. The international UNAIDS 95-95-95 HIV elimination strategy has set targets that 95% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection will receive sustained antiretroviral therapy, 95% of all people receiving antiretroviral therapy will have viral suppression, and 95% of all people living with HIV will know their HIV status. In Northern Ireland, we have surpassed two of these targets; however, modelling suggests that the target for the proportion of individuals infected with HIV being aware of their diagnosis has not yet been reached.

I should advise that a postal testing service already exists in Northern Ireland. SH:24 is registered with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) as an independent medical agency (IMA) with a private doctor (PD) category of care. The services available to residents in Northern Ireland include testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and treatment of chlamydia. These services are delivered in partnership with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT). The NHSCT has commissioned SH:24 to provide these services on behalf of all local Health and Social Care Trusts in NI.

Patients who return a reactive result for HIV/syphilis receive a text message informing them that a clinician will call them to discuss their results. A text back option is also offered. Patients who return a positive test for gonorrhoea or a reactive result for HIV/syphilis are signposted to their local NHS sexual health clinic.

The latest Public Health Agency report, [HIV surveillance in Northern Ireland 2020](#), demonstrates that the number of new HIV diagnoses in 2019 reduced significantly, with a steep decline seen in gay and bisexual men diagnoses. Improvements in testing, earlier diagnosis, and entry into treatment were agreed to be contributory factors.

The number of people living with HIV in Northern Ireland has increased in recent years as a consequence of new diagnoses and improved survival rates due to the success of antiretroviral treatment. HIV testing activity has increased in 2019 to its highest level yet.

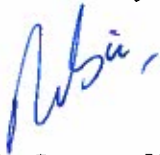
Testing in the hospital setting has shown a year on year increase and 2019 has also seen an increase in tests done in primary care settings.

Using transformation funds, HIV Risk Reduction Clinics were established in 2018/19, in the Belfast and Western Trust areas. These clinics provide testing for sexually-transmitted infections, behavioural interventions aimed at reducing risk, and access to the HIV prevention drug PrEP. Access to this service has since been made available in all Trust areas, for those who are eligible.

The latest figures from 2019 show that 52 new HIV diagnoses were made in Northern Ireland (37 men and 15 women); a 35% decline from 80 in 2018 and a decline of 49% from a peak of 102 new HIV diagnoses reported in 2015. 21 (40%) new HIV diagnoses occurred through gay and bisexual men (GBM) transmission; a 42% decrease from 36 in 2018. 27 (52%) new HIV diagnoses occurred through heterosexual transmission. This is the first time that heterosexual transmission has been higher than transmission between gay and bisexual men in the past ten years and may be an indication of the effectiveness of the PrEP project.

My officials will continue to work with the various health care bodies and voluntary organisations to improve services, as budget constraints allow, and strive to achieve the goal of ending new HIV cases.

Yours sincerely



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health