The National Cancer Control Programme aims to minimise the burden of cancer in Ireland through a ‘whole population, integrated cohesive approach that involves prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment and support’. Nurses working in primary care are ideally placed to help their practice population reduce their risk of cancer through lifestyle changes; improve their uptake of appropriate screening programmes; increase awareness of concerning symptoms and facilitate rapid review and referral within the practice; and support those diagnosed with cancer through their journey. The NCCP cancer education programme for nurses working in primary care supports nurses with the tools to take on this critical role in cancer control.

Introduction
Cancer is a common illness, with over 32,500 people in Ireland diagnosed with cancer annually.1 Given our ageing population, we are facing an enormous challenge, with the number of new cancers in Ireland expected to double over the next 20 years.

In 2007, the National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) was established to implement the recommendations of the National Cancer Strategy.2 The Strategy defined cancer control as a ‘whole population, integrated cohesive approach that involves prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment and support.’

Restructuring of cancer services involved the designation of eight cancer centres in which complex diagnostic and treatment developments would be concentrated, to ensure best outcomes for patients. However, the strategy also recognised the need to build capacity within primary and community care, so that health professionals in the community sector can play a greater part in cancer control.

Nurses in primary care are ideally placed to help their practice population to reduce their risk of cancer through lifestyle changes; improve their uptake of appropriate screening programmes; increase awareness of concerning symptoms and facilitate rapid review and referral within the practice; and support those diagnosed with cancer through their journey.

Cancer prevention
We now know that more than half of all cancers could be prevented through lifestyle changes – as smoking contributes to 30% of cancers, diet and lack of physical activity to 35% and alcohol to approximately 5%.

The NCCP has developed information materials for the public (available at www.cancercontrol.hse.ie) on lifestyle changes that can reduce cancer risk. Making such changes is not always easy however and is dependent on more than provision of information. People also require support and motivation, to feel empowered to make such changes. Evidence supports the ability of nurses in primary care to intervene and effect such positive change.

The NCCP training programme for nurses in primary care (outlined in more detail below) aims to provide nurses with strategies to employ, in bringing about healthier lifestyles in their practice population. For example, the techniques used in motivational interviewing centre on motivational processes within the individual themselves to facilitate change.

Specifically in relation to smoking cessation skills, online learning is available for community health care professionals, with the support of the Irish Practice Nurses Association, at www.promotingsmokingcessation.ie. The NCCP is now also working on specific pharmacotherapy guidelines, to assist healthcare professionals in the treatment of tobacco dependence.
Cancer Screening
Ireland has a number of quality-assured, free, government-funded screening programmes in place. The National Cancer Screening Service (NCSS) has responsibility for three established cancer screening programmes and a non-cancer screening programme for diabetic retinopathy. All programmes are free to those eligible and have been designed to make them as accessible and user-friendly as possible.

The primary care community play a key role in supporting screening programmes. Research indicates that the biggest influence on a person to participate in a screening programme is encouragement from their GP.

• BreastCheck – The National Breast Screening Programme offers women aged 50 to 64 (over 430,000 women) a free mammogram every two years and screening began in February 2000. As of 30 November 2011, 5,071 cancers from the 826,210 mammograms provided to 368,851 women were identified.
  www.breastcheck.ie or Freephone 1800 45 45 55

• CervicalCheck – The National Cervical Screening Programme offers free smear tests to women aged 25 to 60 (over 1.3 million women). During 2011 alone pre-cancerous abnormalities were detected in 8,091 women and cervical cancer was identified in 104 women.
  www.cervicalcheck.ie or Freephone 1800 45 45 55

• BowelScreen – The National Bowel Screening Programme is a recently commenced programme for the early detection of bowel cancer in men and women aged 55-74 (over 1 million people). The programme is initially aimed at people aged 60 to 69 years and may take up to three years for the first round, after which each round should be completed in two

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clinical review

A Strategy and Educational Framework for Nurses caring for People with Cancer in Ireland

clinical review

Bowel screening is a simple home test that looks for tiny amounts of blood in the bowel motion which are not visible to the eye. The home test does not confirm if there is bowel cancer but it identifies people who require further investigation.

www.bowelscreen.ie or Freephone 1800 45 45 55

PSA testing

Prostate cancer concerns and requests for PSA testing are common issues in primary care. The prostate cancer referral guideline (referred to further below) outlines the steps in investigation of a man with symptoms suggestive of prostate cancer. It is important to note that there is currently no evidence to support a national population-based prostate cancer screening programme, as the potential risks outweigh the potential benefits. An asymptomatic man who wishes to have his prostate checked should be fully informed of the advantages and disadvantages, and understand that an accurate assessment requires both PSA testing and a digital rectal examination of the prostate. The NCCP has produced a booklet to support this discussion with men – ‘A guide for men. Having your prostate checked – what you should know’.

Referral for suspected cancer

GP referral guidelines have been developed to assist in the recognition and investigation of suspicious symptoms for the commoner cancers, i.e. lung, breast, prostate and malignant melanoma skin cancer. National referral forms for these four cancers are also available. Rapid access clinics for urgent lung and prostate referrals are located in all eight designated cancer centres. Breast referrals can be sent to any of the cancer centres, plus the satellite unit in Letterkenny. Referrals for possible melanomas should be sent to the local consultant dermatologist or plastic surgeon.

The NCCP Electronic Cancer Referral Project commenced in 2008 and is now live nationwide for breast, prostate and lung cancer referrals in all eight cancer centres. Once the GP sends an electronic cancer referral via Healthlink (www.healthlink.ie), an immediate acknowledgment is given. In addition the cancer team sends a response to the GP with the date of the patient's appointment, within five working days. There is now direct referral to the cancer service via the four ICGP accredited GP practice management software systems (Complete GP, Helix Practice, Manager, Health One, Socrates). The number of electronic cancer referrals is increasing each year, and currently 30% of all breast, prostate and lung cancer referrals are sent electronically nationwide.

Some symptoms may cause great concern, even if not associated with cancer. An example of this is cyclical breast pain, which is very common but not an alarm symptom for breast cancer, especially in the under 35s. The NCCP has produced a breast pain booklet and diary, to assist primary care health care professionals in the assessment and management of a woman with a normal clinical breast examination, who is suffering from cyclical breast pain. This can also be downloaded as a free App for iPhones or smart phones.

The NCCP training programme for nurses in primary care aims to provide nurses with strategies to employ, in bringing about healthier lifestyles in their practice population.

...
come in contact with, appreciate the ways in which they
can maximise their health – whether this is general lifestyle
measures, undergoing regular surveillance, or understanding
how to cope with side effects of their treatment or with anxiety
or distress after a cancer diagnosis. The NCCP is currently
developing survivorship care plans, to support patients and
health care professionals with this.

**Cancer education for nurses working in primary care**
The national strategy and educational framework for nurses
caring for people with cancer in Ireland was developed in part-
nership with the Office of the Nursing and Midwifery Division
(OMNSD). It describes the competencies required by nurses to
care for patients with cancer in both generalist and specialist
healthcare settings. All cancer education programmes for nurses
sit within this strategy.

Since 2011 the NCCP has provided a two day cancer educa-
tion programme for nurses who work in the primary and com-
community care, covering the following four modules:
- Cancer prevention and principles of motivational interview-
ing techniques
- Cancer screening: BreastCheck, CervicalCheck and BowelS-
creen (the new colorectal cancer screening programme)
- Clinical presentation of the common cancers, referral path-
ways and holistic treatment
- Psychosocial, support and communication aspects for the
person living with cancer

The programme aims to enhance nurses’ knowledge and
skills to enable them play a key role in cancer control in the
primary care setting. It is approved by Nursing and Midwifery
Board of Ireland and accredited for 13 Continuing Education
Units (CEU). It is delivered in designated cancer centres, with
video links to other hospitals and regional Centre of Nurse
Midwifery Education (CNME), and to date over 600 nurses have
participated. There are also plans to develop e-learning modules
in the future, to help overcome barriers to participation in the
current training programme.

On completion of the course, the nurse in primary care should
be able to:
- Have an enhanced awareness of the impact of modifiable
lifestyle cancer risk factors e.g. smoking, alcohol, nutrition,
obesity, physical activity and UV radiation exposure and how
to apply suitable evidence-based prevention interventions
- Critically discuss motivational interviewing techniques in the
context of encouraging people to adopt a healthy lifestyle
- Discuss the implementation of evidence based strategies in
primary care to promote optimal uptake of cancer screening
- Recognise symptoms suspicious of cancer
- Critically discuss the referral pathway for patients from
primary care to the specialist cancer services for the common
cancers e.g. breast, prostate, lung and skin
- Discuss the role of the multi-disciplinary team (MDT) in the
assessment, diagnosis and treatment of cancer
- Discuss the different treatment modalities for common

cancers
- Recognise and discuss the psychological aspects of a cancer
diagnosis; living with cancer as a chronic condition; the role
of the nurse in providing patient support in conjunction with
the multidisciplinary primary care team.

Those interested in attending the course should contact their
Regional Centre of Nurse Midwifery Education, their Profes-
sional Development Coordinator for Practice Nursing or email
info@cancercontrol.ie.

**Additional information**
The NCCP website www.cancercontrol.hse.ie contains further
information on the programme and has downloadable copies
of referral guidelines, patient information leaflets etc. For hard
copies of any materials, please phone 01 8287100 or email info@
cancercontrol.ie

For further information on the National Cancer Screening
Service, check the website www.cancerscreening.ie
Online smoking cessation training is available at www.
promotingsmokingcessation.ie
Information on electronic referral is available on the NCCP
website. To register with healthlink, go to www.healthlink.ie

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