

# Development of National Electronic Cancer Referral in Ireland: A Solution for a Safer Referral Patient Pathway

E Nolan<sup>1</sup>, R. Codd<sup>1</sup>, M Laffoy<sup>1</sup>, O. Doogue<sup>2</sup>, B O'Mahony<sup>3, 5</sup>, V. Jordan<sup>4</sup>

1. National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP)
2. The National Healthlink Project
3. The National General Practice Information Technology (GPIT) Group
4. HSE ICT Directorate
5. The Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP)

## Service Description and Driver for Patient Safety

The National Cancer Strategy (2006)<sup>1</sup> recommended that GPs should have comprehensive information available to them, to enable them assess a patient with suspicious symptoms and findings. Primary care is often the first contact with the health system.

The needs of GPs in relation to cancer were identified in the report 'Early Detection of Cancer, A Needs Assessment of General Practitioners'<sup>2</sup>.

The common barriers that were identified included:

- Delay in patient presentation
- Lack of clear recommendations
- Inequity of access
- Communication difficulties

Data from the National Cancer Registry shows that 47% of lung cancer patients are stage IV at the time of diagnosis. The development of electronic referral systems aims to increase the number of patients diagnosed at an earlier stage and thereby maximise the potential for cure.

This is a multi-agency, and involves the NCCP, Healthlink, ICGP, ICT Directorate, HSE and GPIT.

## Patient Safety Initiative

To develop GP electronic referral systems and prompt specialist triage that follow evidence-based clinical pathways. The electronic referral process takes place via The National Healthlink Project ([www.healthlink.ie](http://www.healthlink.ie)).

**Phase one** involved developing site-specific cancer referral forms in Healthlink. Referral guidelines and paper referral forms (breast, prostate and lung) were developed by the NCCP. These referral forms were adapted for online use by Healthlink.

**Phase two** was the development of breast, prostate and lung cancer electronic cancer referral via the four ICGP accredited GP practice management software systems below:

- Complete GP
- Helix Practice Manager
- Health One
- Socrates

**Phase three** is the development of an integrated web services browser using The NCCP Pigmented Lesion GP Referral Form. This will facilitate the development of future electronic referral forms. This is due for completion in 2015.

## References

1. A Strategy for Cancer Control 2006, National Cancer Forum, DOH.
2. Early Detection of Cancer, A Needs Assessment of General Practitioners, Irish College of General Practitioners, 2007
3. Report and Recommendations on Patient Referrals from General Practice to Outpatient and Radiology Services, including the National Standard for Patient Referral Information, HIQA 2011.

## Challenges and Supports

Phase One commenced in 2010 and was completed in 2012. Phase two commenced in 2012 and was complete in 2013. Phase three has just commenced and will be complete by the end of 2015.

There was some resistance to change from some cancer teams and GPs. The project board was a great support, in particular having a GP member provided wonderful insight and suggestions in how to approach the project and GP community.

## Benefits and Outcomes

46% of all breast, prostate and lung cancer referrals were sent electronically in quarter one 2014. This is more than 10% above our annual target for this year of 35%.

The benefits are as follows:

- Streamline the cancer referral process
- Rapid access for patients who are being referred with a suspected cancer
- Provide automatic confirmation of receipt of GP referral
- Provision of direct access for GPs to the cancer teams
- Reduced costs for GP and HSE.
- Introduces a greater degree of safety into the referral process.

The NCCP electronic cancer referral project provides useful lessons for the general electronic referral project. The HIQA report<sup>3</sup> suggests electronic referrals will improve patient referral in Ireland.

## Conclusion

The development of electronic cancer referrals will ensure safer patient care

Table 1: No. Electronic Cancer Referrals (Breast, Prostate and Lung)

Year	Number of electronic cancer referrals
2010	2,070
2011	4,360
2012	9,303
2013	13,381
2014*	16,620*

Data Source: The National Healthlink Project, NCCP

\*Jan to 12<sup>th</sup> June 2014 there was 7,671 electronic cancer referrals, which gives a projected figure of 16,620 for 2014