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Scally Report Welcomed: Many Questions Answered, However Many Remain

The Academy of Clinical Science and Laboratory Medicine welcomes the supplementary Scally report published this week. The persistence of Dr Scally and his team revealed extraordinary data relating to the heretofore unknown number of laboratories servicing Cervicalcheck. We were shocked to learn of the use of laboratories unknown to, and unapproved by, the screening service. The retrospective accreditation of a laboratory in Salford is unusual and we have written to the Irish National Accreditation Board seeking assurances relating to this.

It is inexplicable how, 15 months after this issue became public knowledge, we still do not have clarity on when and where the reported failures in screening quality happened. Best practice in cytology screening, and all investigations in accredited laboratories, dictates that the testing laboratory be recorded, and within that laboratory there is a record of the professional who examined the specimen. Such information would assist in deciding if there are ‘hot spot’ areas where practice requires more focussed review and further actions and improvements.

We are very concerned with the reported variation in weighting between price and quality in the criteria for awarding contracts. In the periods between 2008 and 2012 the weighting allocated to quality fell from 25% to 15% while that allocated to fee, or cost, rose from 25% to 40%. We concur with Dr Scally that price should not be the dominant determining factor in the awarding of contracts. This focus on cost with the additional imposition of penalties for failing to reach required turnaround times mitigates against quality being the primary metric.

It is crucial to the women of Ireland that confidence in this programme is rebuilt and maintained. This can only happen if there is openness and transparency between women, the programme and the contracted providers. Accreditation of laboratories provides assurances that quality management systems are in place. Quality Assurance metrics provide the assurances that these systems are providing the desired result. Quality Assurance metrics were published for the years 2013 to 2016 but not since this time. Scally in his final report comments on these metrics and the variation in reported inadequate smears and total high grade abnormalities. These variations require further scrutiny.

The Academy calls for the publication of statistics from the programme for each year of its operation, showing the data from each laboratory provider, similar to the publication available from other comparable national cervical screening programmes in the UK and EU.

The Academy supports the recommendation by Dr Scally for the introduction of a ‘no fault compensation scheme’ provided that this is accompanied by root cause analysis of identified error.

The NCSS must ensure that regular site visits to contracted laboratories are an integral part of all contracts. Such visits should include participation by scientists with experience in the provision of cytological laboratory services and their accreditation.

For further enquiries contact Marie Culliton, Chief Medical Scientist, Past President and Council member of the Academy of Clinical Science and Laboratory Medicine.