

In Confidence

Office of the Minister of Health
Chair, Cabinet Legislation Committee

Government Response to the Report of the Petitions Committee on the Petition of Breast Cancer Foundation New Zealand: Restore and extend screening for breast cancer

Proposal

- 1 This paper seeks approval of the government's response to the Petitions Committee's petition on extending the screening age from 69 to 74.

Background

- 2 The petition was presented to the House on 14 December 2021. It requested:
 - 2.1 That the House of Representatives urge the Government to restore and extend the screening programme for breast cancer, the leading cause of death for women under 65, by adding breast-screening participation as a Health System Indicator, aiming to screen 70% of eligible women, and screening women aged 70-74.
- 3 The petitioner requested that the Government prioritise women's health through:
 - 3.1 adding breast screening participation to the health system indicators
 - 3.2 investing to regain BreastScreen Aotearoa's agreed target of 70 percent of the eligible screening population
 - 3.3 increasing the screening age to cover 70–74-year-olds
 - 3.4 providing funding and resources to process the COVID-19 backlog within six months.
- 4 The Committee acknowledged the work BSA has undertaken in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the progress made in reducing the backlog of mammograms.

The Petitions Committee findings

- 5 The Committee recommended that the Government consider extending New Zealand's free national breast screening programme to cover women aged between 70 and 74.
- 6 The Committee noted that in 2017 the Health Committee of the 51st Parliament recommended that this be investigated, after considering the petition of Evangelia Henderson on behalf of Breast Cancer Foundation New Zealand.

- 7 The Committee was concerned that more steps have not been taken towards this goal in the last six years.
- 8 The Committee acknowledged the concern of Te Whatu Ora that the increase will cause a strain on ICT capacity but believe that this risk is outweighed by the risk to women's health.
- 9 The Committee agreed that a target in the health system indicators relating to early prevention of, and screening for, cancer would be beneficial. They note that the Government is developing a permanent, cancer-based health system indicator and urge it to complete this work as soon as possible.
- 10 The Committee also encouraged the Government to continue to work closely with BSA and the National Screening Unit to ensure they are appropriately resourced to continue the response to the COVID-19 backlog.

Comment on the Petitions Committee findings and recommendations

- 11 Recommendation: The Petitions Committee has considered the petition of Breast Cancer Foundation NZ— Restore and extend screening for breast cancer — and recommends that the Government consider extending New Zealand's free national breast screening programme to cover women aged between 70 and 74.
- 12 Response: the government has indicated there are two main issues preventing an immediate roll out of an age extension:
 - 12.1 Current capacity for delivering mammograms, noting there is a shortage of Medical Imaging Technologists and Radiologists, and;
 - 12.2 Changes to the current ICT infrastructure as it lacks the integration, flexibility and scalability required to provide modern healthcare services and support programme changes. The new ICT system is planned to be in place by quarter 3 of the 2024 annual year. The Government is implementing initiatives identified as part of the BreastScreen Aotearoa Workforce Development Strategy 2022 – 2032 to increase the workforce.
- 13 Extending breast screening to women aged 70-74 years before equitable coverage is achieved within the current age range risks further increasing inequities in breast cancer morbidity and mortality not only between wāhine Māori and Pacific women and other ethnic groups but also disabled women and gender diverse people.
- 14 If we were to implement an extension to the screening age for breast cancer, a business case will need to be developed to expand the BSA programme to women aged 70-74 years. This will require a budget bid or funding re-prioritisation. A full estimation of the likely downstream costs of age-extension to women aged 70-74 years would be included in the business case.
- 15 Delivery to this age group will require an estimated additional implementation investment of \$30 million in the first two years (including infrastructure costs). The ongoing volume-based costs are estimated at an additional \$9 million per year for the life of programme

- 16 The Government has also allocated funding to support Lead Providers improve the COVID backlog and increase screening coverage to the target of 70%.
- 17 A coverage target for BSA is included in the Interim Government Policy Statement on Health 2022-2024 in Appendix 3 priority 1.3.

Timing of the government response

- 18 The government response must be presented to the House by 29 May 2023.

Consultation

- 19 Te Whatu Ora's National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC) considered the current evidence review. NSAC agreed the overall evidence for screening women aged 70 to 74 years is favourable, noting that while there is still limited primary direct evidence for benefits and harms.
- 20 However, NSAC and the Māori Monitoring and Equity Group raised concerns around the potential impact of age extension on equity and the current pressure on services, which have been substantially exacerbated by COVID-19.
- 21 Te Aka Whai Ora support research or the use of data in making decisions on pro-equity age-adjustment. Te Aka Whai Ora has been consulted with on age-adjustment for cancer screening programmes (bowel, breast and cervical), and has provided feedback relating to age-adjustment which has been incorporated. Te Aka Whai Ora advised that kaupapa Māori quantitative expertise should be used for important questions of pro-equity age-adjustment of screening programmes.
- 22 Feedback from the Public Health Agency and Whaikaha have also been incorporated.

Financial implications

- 23 There are no financial implications at this stage as we are not recommending an immediate roll out of an age extension.

Proactive Release

- 24 The Minister proposes to release the paper proactively.

Recommendations

The Associate Minister of Health recommends that the Cabinet Legislation Committee:

- 1 **note** that on 1 March 2023 the Petitions Select Committee presented its report to the House entitled "Petition of Breast Cancer Foundation NZ: Restore and extend screening for breast cancer";
- 2 **note** that the Select Committee recommended that the government consider extending New Zealand's free national breast screening programme to cover women aged between 70 and 74;

- 3 **note** the Government response does support the recommendation in principle but cannot enact the recommendation until health equity is achieved and workforce and ICT barriers are overcome – as per the goals set out in Te Pae Tata. BSA will develop a business case in collaboration with its partners including a full options analysis for extending the age of breast screening.
- 4 **approve** the government response, attached to this submission, to the Report of the Petitions Select Committee entitled “Petition of Breast Cancer Foundation NZ: Restore and extend screening for breast cancer”;
- 5 **note** that the government response must be presented to the House by 29 May 2023;
- 6 **invite** the Associate Minister of Health to present the government response to the House in accordance with Standing Order 252;
- 7 **invite** the Associate Minister of Health to write to the petitioner enclosing a copy of the government response to the report of the Petitions Select Committee on the petition, after the response has been presented to the House.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Willow-Jean Prime

Associate Minister of Health