

Scottish Government submission of 29 November 2023

PE2062/A: Introduce a National Screening Programme for Prostate Cancer

The Scottish Government, along with the other nations of the United Kingdom, relies on advice from the UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC), an independent expert advisory group. The UK NSC last considered whether to recommend population screening for prostate cancer in November 2020. At that time, the UK NSC concluded that based on available evidence, they could not recommend a prostate screening programme. There were a number of reasons for this, which they have published on their website: <https://view-health-screening-recommendations.service.gov.uk/prostate-cancer/>

It considered the use of the prostate specific antigen (PSA) test to identify prostate cancers. The PSA test identifies the levels of a protein called prostate specific antigen (PSA) in a man's blood, however, PSA level can be raised for a number of reasons and doesn't confirm the man has prostate cancer.

As a result, while the PSA test can be one helpful tool for GPs when assessing a patient, the test is not definitive enough to detect prostate cancer which may require treatment, can falsely find men who do not have prostate cancer, and can also miss some cancers. The UK NSC determined that it would therefore not be a suitable test for a national prostate screening programme. The UK NSC also noted it is still unclear if other tests such as an MRI scan, with or without PSA, are accurate enough.

It is also unclear how PSA screening impacts deaths due to prostate cancer. Using this in a national screening programme could harm men, as some of them would be diagnosed with a cancer that would not have caused them problems during their life. This would lead to additional tests and treatments which can also have harmful side effects.

In addition, the UK NSC found there is no single treatment that is definitely better for patients with early-stage prostate cancer, as treatment effectiveness needs to be weighed up against side effects.

However, research is ongoing. Researchers are investigating methods for predicting prostate cancer risk using a combination of a blood test and other information about a man which could be more accurate than the PSA test. In addition, a large prostate screening study called TRANSFORM was announced on 19 November, International Men's Day. This will look at potential innovative screening methods like an MRI scan to detect prostate cancer, and will recruit hundreds of thousands of men for the research.

The UK NSC are due to review their recommendation in the next 12 months regarding prostate screening, and will take account of any new evidence available to them at that time. Should they recommend prostate screening, the Scottish Screening Committee will advise Scottish Ministers on how to take that recommendation forward.

Public Health Capabilities Division