

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

2nd Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), Wednesday 7
February 2024

PE2062: Introduce a National Screening Programme for Prostate Cancer

Petitioner	Bill Alexander
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a national screening programme for prostate cancer.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2062

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 2 November 2023.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 506 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE2062: Introduce a National Screening Programme for Prostate Cancer

Petitioner

Bill Alexander

Date Lodged:

02 November 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a national screening programme for prostate cancer.

Previous action

I have written to the Scottish Government but they have no plans to introduce a screening programme.

Background information

One in eight men will get prostate cancer. Scottish men are historically reluctant to go to the doctors. Prostate cancer symptoms may not be known about and regarded as just being part of getting older, or drinking too much tea or coffee. Meanwhile, a very serious illness can go undetected until it is too late. It is all very well to say that there can be risks associated with tests for prostate cancer, and it can be a process that causes alarm or anxiety, but should this not be a decision for the patient to make after having been given the options following an initial diagnosis?

Annexe B



Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2062](#): ‘Introduce a National Screening Programme for Prostate Cancer’, lodged by Bill Alexander

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

[PE2062](#) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a national screening programme for prostate cancer. The petitioner acknowledges the risks of screening for prostate cancer, but states that patients should be able to make an informed choice about whether they wish to access screening.

Prostate cancer prevalence, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment in Scotland

Prostate cancer is the fourth most common type of cancer in Scotland, and the most common form of cancer in men. According to Public Health Scotland’s [most recent report on cancer incidence in Scotland](#), there were 4,265 diagnoses of prostate cancer in the year ending December 2021, representing 12.1% of all cancer cases in Scotland. This represents an increase of 10% since 2019. As [Cancer Research UK notes](#), survival rates for prostate cancer are generally high, particularly if the disease is diagnosed early.

Prostate cancer usually develops slowly, and can be present without symptoms for many years. [Symptoms often only appear](#) when the prostate becomes large enough to impact the urethra. This increased pressure on the urethra can cause symptoms including an increased need to urinate, a feeling that the bladder has not completely emptied, and straining when urinating.

There is no one test used to diagnose prostate cancer. However, some of the most common tests include a prostate-specific antigen (PSA)

blood test, a physical examination of the prostate, and a biopsy. The PSA blood test can help to diagnose some prostate cancers; however, the test [carries potential disadvantages](#) as it can miss prostate cancer in some patients, and may falsely diagnose others, leading to unnecessary tests and treatment.

[Treatment for prostate cancer](#) depends on factors including the stage of the cancer, and the age of the patient. Watchful waiting and active surveillance can be recommended if the cancer is unlikely to affect the patient's natural lifespan. In cases where treatment is required, options include radiotherapy, hormone therapy, and surgery to remove the prostate.

Benefits and disadvantages of prostate cancer screening programmes

Routine screening for prostate-specific antigen (PSA) levels is [a controversial topic](#) in the medical community. The [PSA test can be unreliable](#) in prostate cancer screening and diagnosis as it does not specifically test for cancer. A person's PSA level can be raised for multiple reasons, including urinary tract infections and inflammation of the prostate. Using the PSA test to screen for prostate cancer could therefore lead to some men undergoing unnecessary biopsies and treatment, although most men are now [offered an MRI scan](#) before a biopsy to avoid unnecessary invasive testing.

A [2023 review of evidence](#) conducted by Prostate Cancer UK suggested that advancements in MRI technology and biopsy techniques could facilitate the development of a national screening programme for prostate cancer. The review found that the referral of patients for multiparametric MRI scans following the detection of a high level of PSA in their blood [resulted in a 64% decrease](#) in the number of unnecessary biopsies conducted.

Scottish Government actions

The petitioner noted that they had contacted the Scottish Government, and been advised that the Scottish Government currently has no plans to introduce a screening programme.

In [its response to the petition](#), dated 29 November 2023, the Scottish Government stated that it follows the advice of the UK National Screening Committee (UKNSC) with regard to screening for health conditions. The UKNSC [does not currently recommend population screening for prostate cancer](#), as the PSA test cannot accurately identify

prostate cancer that requires treatment. The test can falsely diagnose prostate cancer in some men, and miss cancer in others. As the Scottish Government noted in its submission, population screening for prostate cancer using the PSA test may also detect cancer that would not have caused a patient any health problems during their lifetime. This could cause inadvertent harm to a patient, as they may undergo unnecessary tests and treatments.

The Scottish Government's response also acknowledged that the UKNSC is due to conduct a review of its prostate cancer screening recommendations, and confirmed that the Scottish Screening Committee will advise Ministers regarding any new recommendations emerging from this review.

Scottish Parliament actions

There has been no recent Scottish Parliament action concerning this topic.

Sarah Swift
Researcher

29 January 2024

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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Annexe C

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