

Free Contraception scheme will be Undermined Without Improved Access



Women should be provided the choice to access contraception in pharmacies

The government plan to introduce free contraception for women aged 17-25 will be undermined if access to contraception is needlessly constrained. This warning was issued by the Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) which is calling for women to be given the option of accessing oral contraception, over the counter, direct from pharmacies.

Funding was allocated in Budget 2022 for the creation of a scheme that would enable women aged 17 to 25 to access contraception free of charge. It is envisaged that the scheme will cover oral contraceptives (The Pill) as well as the administration of both long-acting reversible contraception (LARCs) and contraceptive injections. Despite being available over the counter in many other countries, women who opt for oral contraceptives will be required to obtain a prescription through their GP.

Ann Marie Horan pharmacist and Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) Vice President, said the ease of access and choice for women should be at the centre of the new scheme. “The introduction of free contraception for young women is very welcome development in the provision of women’s health in Ireland. Ensuring convenient and easy access to contraception for should be central to the government’s plan.

“Just as women have the choice over what form of contraception, they wish to use they should also be given the choice of where they can access it. Where there is no medical reason for a woman to visit a doctor there should be no bureaucratic reason either. When it is clinically appropriate women should have the choice to access the pill direct from a pharmacy.”

Ms. Horan explained that pharmacies already have experience in dispensing contraception without prescription. “Emergency hormonal contraception (the morning after pill) has been available over the counter since 2015. Pharmacists are trained and have the experience in reviewing patients to determine if it is safe to dispense contraception without referring to a GP. There is simply no clinical reason why this model could not be extended to other forms of oral contraception.

“Previous research in Ireland has shown that almost half of women would favour being able to access contraception direct from a pharmacy. Barriers to accessing contraception are not just financial, requiring the time and effort to get a doctor’s prescription, is entirely unnecessary and should be removed.

“The Pill is one of the most widely used forms of contraception in the world. It is a safe and well-studied medicine and has been used by women for almost half a century. It is now safely available over the counter in many other countries including the US, New Zealand and Canada.

“At a time when GPs across the country are raising concerns about their capacity, and patients are waiting increasingly longer and longer times for GP appointments, this is in no one’s best interests.

Anne Marie Horan concluded, “The essence of Sláintecare is about providing the right care at the right place and the right time. Providing women with the choice to access contraception from their pharmacy achieves all three aims. Failing to do so could undermine the value of the scheme and deprive women of contraceptive care.”