

Ireland should follow UK example on contraceptives – Pharmacists



Women should be able to access contraceptives without prescription and free of charge

The Irish Pharmacy Union has reiterated its call for women to be allowed access to contraception directly from pharmacies, without prescription and free of charge.

“As of this week, two specific progesterone-based oral contraceptives are available over the counter in UK pharmacies without prescription. Women in Ireland should also be allowed similarly convenient access to oral contraceptives through their pharmacist,” said Kathy Maher, a community pharmacist and past-President of the IPU.

“The 2020 Programme for Government commits to the establishment of free contraceptive care, starting with women and girls aged between 17 and 25. Prior to this, the former Minister for Health, Simon Harris TD established a working group in 2019 to consider the policy, regulatory and legislative issues relating to enhanced access to contraception, following the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment.

“While stating that contraceptive usage is generally high and stable, the working group cited lack of local access, cost, inconvenience, lack of knowledge, and embarrassment among younger women, as the main obstacles to accessing contraception in Ireland, among other

factors. We look forward to the work of the Contraception Implementation Group being progressed as rapidly as possible.

“Improving access to regular birth control means that more women will avail of it and this in turn will reduce the incidence of unintended or crisis pregnancy. These acknowledged issues that the UK scheme has sought to address are also a concern in Ireland.”

In its 2019 submission to the Department of Health on the subject, the IPU pointed to HSE research that almost half of women in Ireland would prefer to access contraception through their pharmacy.

“Irish pharmacists have been trusted to supply free emergency contraception without prescription since 2011, and this service has been funded for medical card holders since 2017. Pharmacists would undergo appropriate training and would provide information in respect of the contraceptive being dispensed.

“Oral contraceptives are among the safest and most studied medicines available and there is no clinical reason why they should universally require a prescription. In the UK, two types of progesterone contraceptives have been approved for pharmacy dispensing, to include a brief consultation with the pharmacist, and these are known to have high levels of efficacy and a strong safety profile.

“There is no clinical reason why oral contraceptives should still require a prescription. The oral contraceptive is one of the safest and most well studied medicines available. The supply of hormonal contraception directly from a pharmacy, under protocol without prescription, is becoming increasingly accepted worldwide. In Ireland, we have a de facto version of this service when a woman uses an online doctor to get a prescription, as the clinical blood pressure and BMI checks are carried out by the pharmacy. Public opinion research carried out by Behaviour & Attitudes consistently shows that the public overwhelmingly wants a greater range of medicines made available without prescription.

“Both the American Academy of Family Physicians and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists support access to contraception without prescription, and it has become widely available across the USA and Canada. The World Health Organisation also recommends this in its guidelines on contraception, so we need to move forward positively with this very meaningful development which will be of most benefit to women,” Ms Maher concluded.

ENDS

Note to editors:

The IPU proposal would ensure that:

- Pharmacists will only be able to supply contraceptives after undertaking additional training and according to strict criteria. Clear criteria and formal assessment that are used internationally when certain contraceptives are supplied will be applied in the controlled pharmacist-only model of supply;
- Supply of contraceptives will include oral contraceptives, patches, rings and injections;
- It would not be a requirement for the woman to have previously been prescribed a contraceptive;
- Supply of contraceptives by the pharmacist would initially be restricted to women aged 17 years and older;
- A woman will need to have a formal consultation and BP/BMI check with the pharmacist every 6 months. Following the consultation, the pharmacist can supply up to 3 months' contraceptive, followed by a further 3 months' contraceptive in the same pharmacy before a follow-up consultation is required;
- A record of the supply of the contraceptive will be kept on the patient's medication record (PMR).