

For immediate release: 21.3.06

ISSUED ON BEHALF OF THE BRITISH SOCIETY OF GASTROENTEROLOGY

Press Enquiries:

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DELAY LIKELY FOR LIFE-SAVING BOWEL CANCER SCREENING PROGRAMME

It looks unlikely that a new screening programme for bowel cancer will go ahead next month as planned, warned the new president of the British Society of Gastroenterology today.

The government had planned to start sending out screening kits to everyone in their sixties next month in the areas chosen to start the bowel cancer screening programme.

Twenty-five per cent of England was due to be covered by the programme this year and the rest by the end of 2009.

The new president of the BSG, Professor Tony Morris, Director of the National Endoscopy Training Centre at the Royal Liverpool Hospital, said: "It's supposed to start on the 1st April but the nurse screeners who would be seeing patients haven't been appointed yet."

He said it was likely the programme will now be limited to the initial English pilot site in Coventry to begin with.

It has been estimated that the programme could save the lives of around 1,200 people a year in England by diagnosing bowel cancer earlier - allowing more effective treatment.

The programme involves sending home testing kits to everyone aged between 60 and 69 over a three year period and then repeated every two years.

A stool sample is applied onto the test strips and posted back for analysis. If blood is found in the faeces, people would be seen by a specialist nurse and referred for colonoscopy to check for the presence of tumours in the bowel.

Professor Morris added: "It was the government's intention to roll the programme out over three years, starting in areas of high deprivation, but the programme is now on hold because the money hasn't been released."

Research due to be presented at the BSG Annual Scientific Meeting in Birmingham also suggests colonoscopy services are not yet ready to cope with the demands of a national screening programme.

A study from Kent and Medway suggests that only 57% of colonoscopists met the national standard for colonoscopy although the programme was not due to start there until next year.

A survey from Wales shows that there are not enough colonoscopists to cope with a screening programme - although the Welsh Assembly is also waiting to make a decision on when to start screening.

Professor Morris said: "The bar has been set high with regard to selection of screening endoscopists and many areas of the country may not be ready."

"Although the decision to delay the start of the programme is disappointing, it's heartening to see that the government is committed to making it a quality-based programme when it does start."

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Notes to editors:

- Bowel cancer is a disease of the large bowel or rectum - it is sometimes called colorectal or colon cancer
- Bowel cancer is the third most common cancer in men, and the second most common cancer in women in the UK
- Each year, there are about 18,500 new cases of bowel cancer in men, and over 16,000 cases in women
- In the UK, about 16,000 people will die of the disease every year, making it the second most common cause of cancer death - with lung cancer being the most common of all
- Only around 10% of cancers are currently caught at an early stage but around nine out of ten patients will survive if diagnosed early