

## **Criteria for Good Practice in Electronic Referral for Patients with Suspected Cancer**

### **Introduction**

The National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) and Healthlink are developing electronic referral procedures for patients who present to their GP with symptoms suggestive of cancer. This development has the support of GPs and of consultants who specialise in cancer care.

Its purpose is to enable:

1. Faster and easier access to a consultant opinion for patients who present to their GP with symptoms suspicious of cancer
2. Better hospital triage of patients with suspicious symptoms
3. Online communication between consultant and GP
4. Timely access to specialist care.

The electronic referral process is being developed on a phased basis. In 2009 it is intended to pilot online forms for Lung, Breast and Prostate symptoms suggestive of cancer. The facility will then be available nationally.

An NCCP project team plan to work with the practice management system vendors to ensure this information can be integrated into the patient's files in the practice management systems.

It is essential that operational criteria are established to ensure that this electronic facility runs smoothly and that patient needs are to the fore.

### **Criteria for using the electronic referral system**

#### **GPs**

1. The GP should use the electronic facility exclusively where this is available. It is especially important to enable evaluation of the pilot phase.
2. The GP should refer the patient to one Specialist Cancer Centre only. This should be in consultation with the patient.
3. The electronic form requires the GP to insert certain standardised information so that the consultant can develop an opinion as to the urgency of the patient's symptoms. The electronic form should be fully completed.
4. Where an electronic referral is made it is not necessary to send the 'traditional' referral letter or form.
5. In an effort to ensure that the patient always receives a timely appointment it is recommended that:
  - a. The GP should inform the patient that the referral is being made electronically.
  - b. The GP should receive a response from the hospital within five working days.
  - c. Where the hospital does not usually provide the appointment date at the same time as the response of the referral, the hospital should inform the patient when to expect the appointment.
6. If the GP does not receive a response from the hospital within five working days Healthlink's 'Alert System' will trigger and Healthlink will contact the hospital. In addition it is recommended that if a referral response or appointment is not received:
  - a. The GP contacts the Specialist Cancer Centre.
  - b. If an appointment is not available at the time of response, the patient will be contacted with an appointment at a later date by the hospital.

#### **Specialist Cancer Centre**

1. The Specialist Centre accepting the electronic referral should ensure that facilities are in place to receive and triage the referral in a safe manner, to respond to the referral and to offer the patient an appointment.
2. The Specialist Centre should respond to the GP's electronic referral within five working days.

3. The Specialist Centre should inform the patient of the appointment date.
4. The Specialist Centre is responsible for processing the electronic form, based on the information provided by the GP and for offering an appointment. It should ensure that monitoring arrangements are in place to assess this process.
5. The referral form should be placed in the patient's chart.
6. Patients cannot be refused an appointment. This is the case in paper based referral system. However, there may be some situations where the consultant and GP agree that a patient appointment is not necessary at that time and that consultant advice is sufficient. **This arrangement must be agreed by the GP and the consultant on each occasion. Any such discussions should be documented in the patient chart.**
7. The Specialist centre has agreed to adhere to the Service Level Agreement that has been signed with the National Healthlink Project.

**NCCP and Healthlink**

1. The NCCP - Healthlink Governance Group should plan and manage all electronic developments for cancer referral. It should sign-off on all online developments before they are implemented and evaluate their functioning
2. The content of the electronic referral form should be developed by a nominated consultant and agreed nationally with specialist colleagues and with the ICGP
3. GPs should be fully informed of the development and be aware of the procedure to follow.
4. Patient named data will be protected.
5. This project is in compliance with the Data Protection Act 2004.

**Signed by General Practitioner:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ (please print)  
 Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_