

From the Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
Secretary of State for Health



Your Ref: 01100635

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Dear Tessa,

Thank you for your letter of 17 February on behalf of a number of your constituents about Cancer Research UK's 'Commit to Beat Cancer' campaign.

I am aware that Cancer Research UK is asking all Parliamentary candidates hoping to be elected to Parliament in the next general election to sign up to its Cancer Commitment, which covers all aspects of cancer from prevention to research. The charity hopes that all elected candidates will commit to ensuring continued improvements in cancer services in the UK.

Improving services for people with cancer, and suspected cancer, is a key priority for this Government. On 29 September 2009, the Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced plans to offer all patients in England access to tests that can confirm or exclude cancer within one week. Currently, GPs can refer patients with suspected cancer to be seen by a cancer specialist within two weeks. Under the new plans, where the GP thinks that the risk of cancer does not justify a two-week urgent referral to see a specialist, but there are symptoms that require investigation, the GP will be able to refer for the appropriate tests to be carried out within one week. We expect that in the majority of cases, the tests will show that there is nothing wrong, or that the person has a non-cancer related problem that needs treating. However, for those people who are shown to have cancer, the earlier diagnosis will increase the chances of curative treatment.

We will be rolling out this programme over five years, starting from 2011/12. This phased approach will enable the NHS to develop the extra workforce and equipment capacity that will be required to enable these tests to be carried out. For the first two years, we will be focusing on the diagnostic tests associated with ovarian, lung and colorectal cancers. Those patients can expect to know within two weeks whether or not they have cancer. By the end of the five-year period, we want to see all patients knowing the results of diagnostic tests within one week.

We will be consulting widely on the implementation of these proposals, working with the NHS, key stakeholders and the professions to ensure that this commitment to patients is successfully delivered.


In 2000, we published *the NHS Cancer Plan*, which set out our comprehensive strategy for tackling cancer in England. Since then, we have seen positive changes and significant improvements in cancer services and outcomes.

However, we have not become complacent. In December 2007 we published the *Cancer Reform Strategy*, which outlines how we intend to provide world-class cancer services in England. It includes measures to improve cancer prevention, speed up the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, reduce inequalities, improve the experience of people living with and beyond cancer, ensure care is delivered in the most appropriate settings and ensure patients can access effective new treatments quickly. The strategy can be viewed on the Department of Health website at www.dh.gov.uk by entering 'cancer reform strategy' in the search bar.

Good progress is being made on delivering the commitments we set out in the strategy, which cover the areas highlighted by Cancer Research UK in its Cancer Commitment. This is shown in the 2008 and 2009 annual reports on the strategy, which can be viewed on the Department's website by entering 'cancer reform strategy annual reports' in the search bar.

I hope this reply assures your constituents of the Government's ongoing commitment to improving outcomes and services for people with cancer.

Best wishes,


ANDY BURNHAM