



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Note

Paper No. 76/20

27 November 2020

NIAR-351-2020

Dr Robert Barry

Covid-19, excess deaths and hospital waiting lists

Introduction

This briefing note uses the latest available statistical information to highlight some of the collateral impacts on health arising from the current pandemic in Northern Ireland.

Excess deaths above those arising from Covid-19

The latest NISRA statistical bulletin for weekly deaths shows that there were 1,301 deaths involving suspected or confirmed Covid-19 up to 20 November 2020.¹

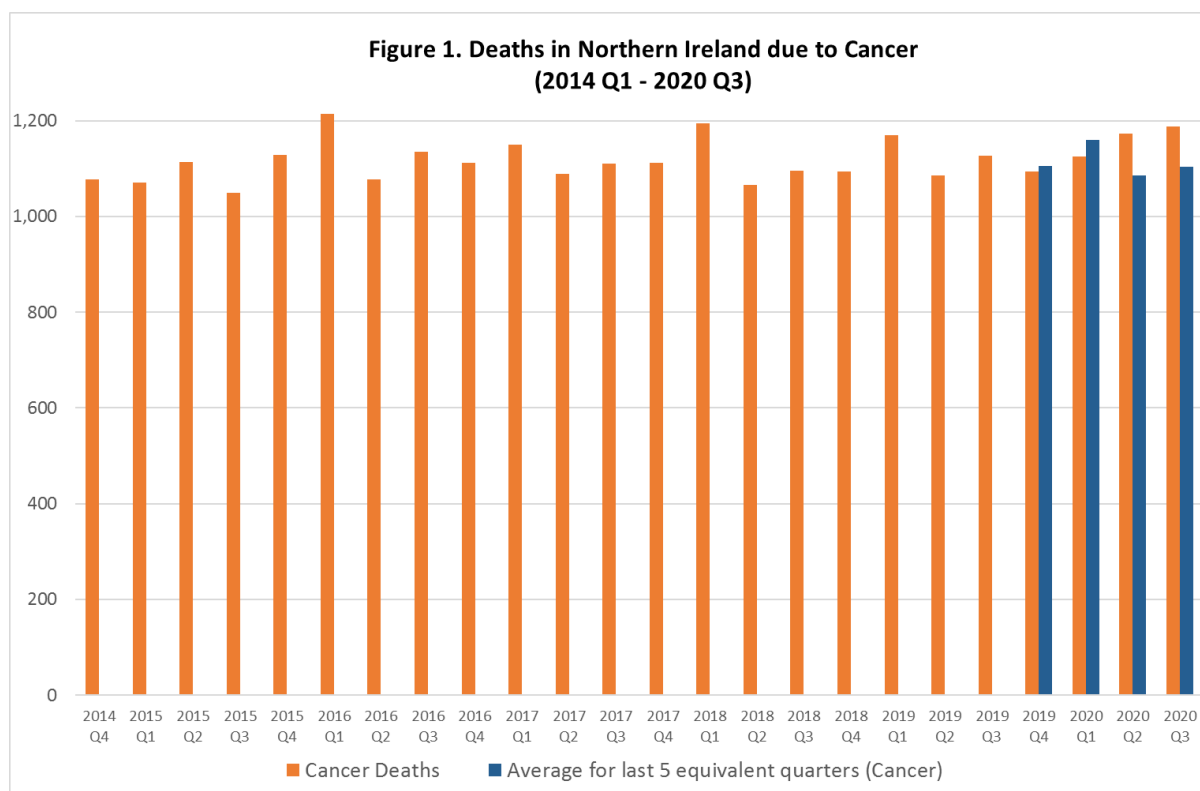
When Covid-19 deaths are excluded from the data for the period w/e 20 March² to w/e 20 November, a comparison with the average for the equivalent period over the past five years indicates a total of 393 excess deaths.

¹ NISRA Weekly Deaths Bulletin, 27 November 2020 - <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/weekly-deaths>

² The first Covid-19 death in Northern Ireland occurred on 18 March 2020.

Further analysis of NISRA quarterly data on causes of death between Q1 2014 and Q3 2020 revealed the following:³

- A total of 172 excess deaths due to cancer in quarters 2 and 3 2020 (i.e. Apr – Sep 2020) compared with the average for the same two quarters over the previous five years (see Figure 1).
- A total of 29 excess deaths due to heart disease in quarters 2 and 3 2020 (i.e. Apr – Sep 2020) compared with the average for the same two quarters over the previous five years.



While the figures for excess deaths excluding those arising from Covid-19 are relatively small up to the end of September, these figures are likely to rise over time due to patients not being seen or referred soon enough for diagnosis or treatment.

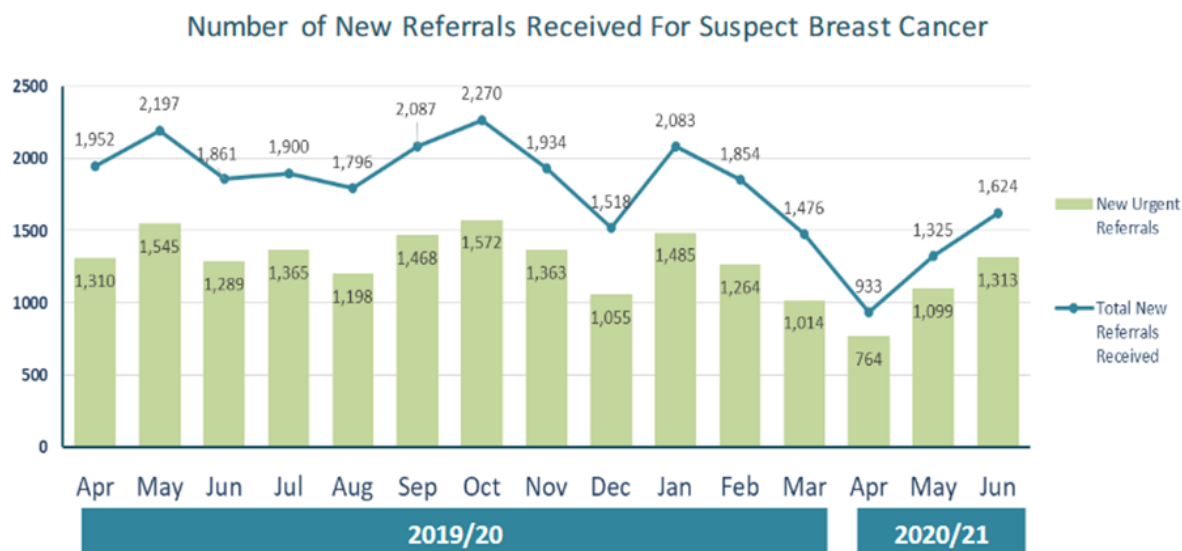
Impact of Covid-19 on referrals and hospital waiting lists

The latest available figures for breast cancer referrals show a sharp decline in referrals for the period April - June 2020 compared with previous quarters (Figure 2). There were a total

³ Registrar General Quarterly Tables 2020, 18 November 2020 - <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/registrar-general-quarterly-tables-2020>

of 3,882 new referrals during the quarter compared with 6,010 for the same quarter in the previous year (i.e. a 35% decrease).

Figure 2. (Source: DoH Cancer Waiting Times)⁴



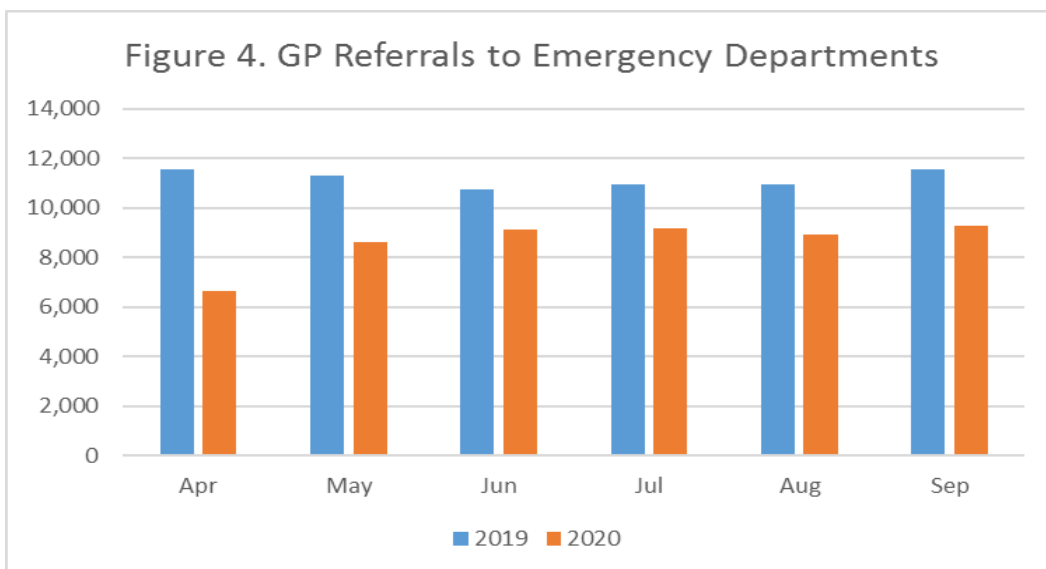
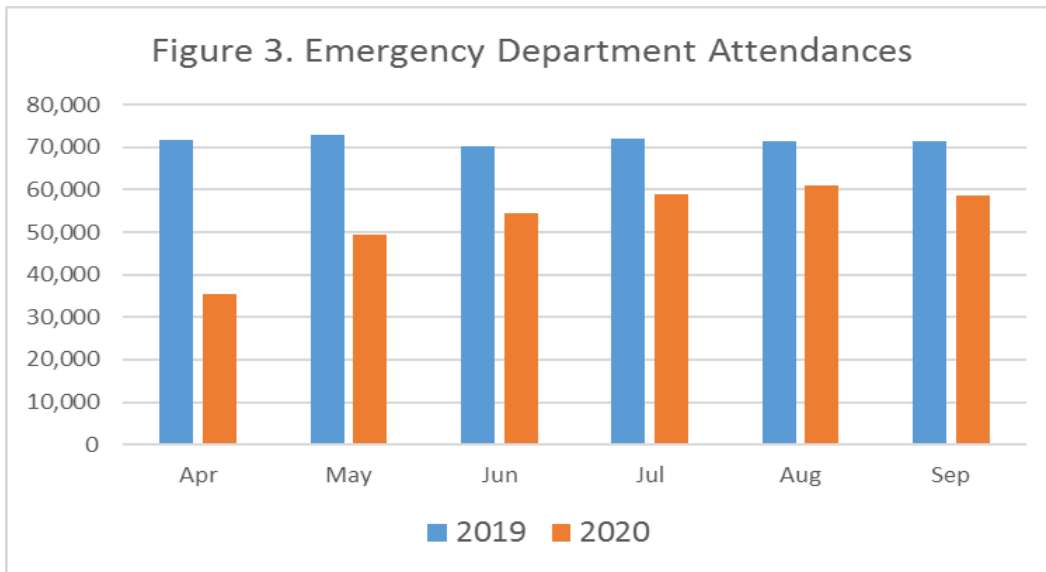
The number of patients seen by a breast cancer specialist after an urgent referral also fell during the Apr-Jun 2020 quarter. There were a total of 2,841 patients seen during the quarter compared with 4,023 during the same quarter in the previous year (i.e. a 29% decrease).

The number of patients who commenced first treatment for all cancers also fell during the Apr-Jun 2020 quarter. A total of 2,121 patients received first treatment during the quarter compared with 2,497 during the same quarter in the previous year (i.e. a 15% decrease).

The latest available figures for emergency department attendances (Figure 3) and referrals (Figure 4), covering the period to the end of September 2020, also show a sharp fall since the onset of the pandemic.⁵ Total attendances during Apr-Sep 2020 were down on the same period in 2019 by 111,922 (or 26%), while GP referrals to emergency departments were down by 15,288 (or 23%).

⁴ Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Cancer Waiting Times (April –June 2020), published 24 September 2020 - <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hs-ni-wts-cancer-waiting-times-q1-20-21.pdf>

⁵ Department of Health, Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics, 26 November 2020 - <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/dhssps-statistics-and-research/hospital-waiting-times-statistics>



The impact on waiting lists for outpatient appointments and diagnostic tests can also be clearly seen in the latest figures as at 30 September 2020: ⁶

- 327,189 people waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment (with 48% of these waiting for over a year). This represents an increase of 20,123 since 31 March 2020.
- 160,663 waiting for a diagnostic test (with 45% of these waiting more than six months). This represents an increase of 29,623 since 31 March 2020.

⁶ Department of Health, Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics, 26 November 2020 - <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/dhssps-statistics-and-research/hospital-waiting-times-statistics>