

Up to 30pc of smear tests give the wrong result

Eilish O'Regan
Health Correspondent

UP to 30pc of tests for abnormal cells – which could leave women at risk of cervical cancer – are giving the wrong result due to human error.

A significant number of women are erroneously getting the all-clear after being screened for the abnormalities, which may lead to cancer of the cervix.

John O' Leary, Professor of Pathology at Trinity College and the Coombe Women's Hospital, yesterday said the false negative rate in reading smear tests here is likely to be between 10 and 30pc.

This is in line with international failure rates because of the reliance on manual screening for abnormal cells.

Women are urged to have regular cervical smear tests in order to minimise the risk of any abnormal cells not being picked up.

Prof O' Leary was launching a major new research project, headed by an Irish Cervical Screening Research Consortium known as Cervica, which will include piloting automated screen-

ing in a number of laboratories here.

Prof O' Leary said the revolutionary scanning technology may be able to reduce the failure rate in reading smears to around 2pc. "The cervical screening groups in laboratories here are highly trained and motivated. Automation will take a element of potential human error out of it," he said.

Tests are currently carried out in various laboratories around the country.

The automated testing is being piloted in the Coombe Women's Hospital in Dublin and it is also expected to be extended to the laboratory in St Luke's Hospital, Rathgar.

Prof O' Leary said it is intended to try out a second automated screening system later on in the trial in a laboratory outside Dublin in order to get as wide a distribution of patients as possible around the country. If abnormal cells on the cervix are found they can be treated to prevent them later developing into can-

cer.

There are 70 deaths from cervical cancer in Ireland every year and 200 new cases are diagnosed annually. Many women are not being tested and it will be 2008 before a national cervical screening programme is in place.

Earlier this year Janet Donnelly (38) from Cabra, a mother of one, died from cancer after winning €500,000 compensation in the High Court for being given a wrong test result by the laboratory in the Royal College of Surgeons in 1999.

Prof O' Leary said yesterday that the new research, which has received €1.2m funding from the Health Research Board, will also be looking at the impact of the new vaccine, Gardasil, to guard against women getting the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which can cause cervical cancer.

"We will also be seeing how women who get a positive result from a smear deal with it. There is no point in putting information out if you don't know how people will process it."

