

By Niamh Griffin

A NATIONAL shortage of hormone replacement therapy and contraceptive pills is affecting thousands of women across Ireland, campaigners warn.

A series of shortages of the most commonly prescribed HRT products, which replace hormones including oestrogen that naturally decline during menopause, has meant some Irish women have changed the product they use four times since August.

Some women are even resorting to cutting up high-dose HRT patches to try to get the correct dose because the product they were using is no longer available.

Pharmacists have described the situation as 'distressing'. But as the health authorities advise women to consult doctors about alternatives, campaigners say the options are becoming narrower.

This comes as British doctors and health leaders write to their government calling for action, describing the situation there as 'catastrophic'.

HRT boosts hormones which decline as women approach or experience the menopause.

Oestrogen and progesterone are offered in different combinations. The menopause affects women dif-

'These drugs have given women back their lives'

ferently but many experience changes to their mental health as well as physical symptoms.

HRT is available in tablet form, as a patch, gel or an implant. Tablets are currently in stock but are not suitable for all women.

Loretta Dignam, founder of The Menopause Hub, said: 'It's been an ongoing issue for months, women deserve better. These drugs have actually given women back their lives.'

'I mean if they haven't been sleeping for sometimes years, or they've been having anxiety or a lot of symptoms, they are terrified of going back to the way they were.'

Ms Dignam said the weight of the crisis is falling on the women affected, and then on doctors and pharmacists to source new products.

She said: 'A pharmacist rang me yesterday to say a woman came in

Menopausal women left without treatment due to HRT shortage

and basically cried because she couldn't get her products.'

A spokeswoman for the Irish Pharmacists Union said: 'The IPU is aware that there are currently shortages in some HRT medications. Obviously, it can be very distressing for patients when supply problems arise, and Irish community pharmacists are doing all they can to support patients directly in their communities.'

Problems started last year when two patches, Seven Sequi and FemSeven Conti, were withdrawn for further research as they didn't stick properly to the skin. This in turn increased demand for other patches.

In Ireland, Ms Dignam said the first shortage here was a patch called Evorel Conti, which went out of stock over the summer.

This was a combined patch supplying both oestrogen and progesterone in one hit.

In a domino effect, she said other patches and gels including Evorel, Estradot and Divigel in turn have gone out of stock.

Ms Dignam warned: 'Some women would have had to change four times in that time. They might have gone to a more expensive solution, and all the problems of having to ring around to pharmacies and trying to source it.'

Some patches come in different strengths marked as 100 or 50 for example.

She said she has heard of women having to buy higher strength patches from a different brand and cutting them diagonally to reduce the dose.

Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) chief Darren Scully wrote to Ms Dignam saying they have told other suppliers to

'We cannot force a company to supply us'

prepare for increased demand. But he warned: 'We cannot force a company to supply product to Ireland.'

He said there were worldwide problems with Evorel and the manufacturers have said it could be mid-year before supply resumes.

SUPPLY: Evorel will be available again in May, the regulatory authority claims



CRISIS:
Loretta Dignam in plea for medicines

This week, a HPRA spokeswoman said: 'The causes of the HRT shortages relate to both active substance availability and manufacturing delays.'

'The HPRA continues to be in frequent contact with the suppliers to maintain efforts to expedite resupply as soon as possible.'

She said they are hopeful that Evorel products will be available again in May.

Ms Dignam said the shortages and lack of information are adding to an already stressful situation for women. There have been concerns raised about possible links between HRT and an increased risk of breast cancer, so women are advised to consult with their doctors.

Women have also been experiencing problems with the supply of the contraceptive pill.

As with British authorities, the HPRA lists three types of contraceptive pill

which are unavailable.

Niall Behan, head of the Irish Family Planning Association, said the shortages of contraceptive pills are

an unfair pressure on women. He said the Cilest contraceptive pill has been out of stock since July last year.

Other pills including Zoely and Minulet have also become impossible to find in recent months, he said.

'It can take women a long time to find a pill that suits them and it is unfair that these products can be withdrawn with little consideration for the needs of the women who use them,' Mr Behan said.

Regarding the three pills listed on the HPRA website, the spokeswoman said Logynon is expected back in stock at the end of March, with Minulet and Ovranette expected to be available for ordering from later this month.

'The HPRA continues to engage with the suppliers of these medicines to ensure that supply is restored as soon as possible and in the interim a number of other oral contraceptives are available.'

'We recommend that if a patient is experiencing difficulty with any medicine, that they should discuss their treatment with a doctor or pharmacist,' she said.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health said its Women's Taskforce has also looked into the shortages.

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Bumper pay packets for chosen few



THE Government signed off on half a dozen bumper salaries for public service positions over the last year including €200,000 a year for the project director responsible for building the controversial National Children's Hospital.

The pay packets were approved by the Department of Public Expenditure following negotiations, according to documents seen by the Irish Mail on Sunday.

They included approval for: ■ €200,000 along with a car, health insurance, and access to an improved pension scheme for the chief executive of the newly created Land Development Agency; ■ An increase in the salary of Sport Ireland chief executive John

By Ken Fose

■ An extension to the contract of IDA boss Martin Shanahan with a salary of €187,000 per annum;

■ Two separate deals for the project director and the chief officer of the National Children's Hospital worth €200,000 and €177,175 respectively.

A series of separate deals were also hammered out for senior staff to be hired at the National Screening Service, the National Archives and the Health Insurance Authority.

All exceeded what had previously been allowed or related to newly created positions.

given to the new chief executive of the Land Development Agency, John Coleman, who was appointed last September.

Internal departmental records explain how a seven-year contract would be on offer with a basic salary of €200,000.

This was to originally include access to what is known as the public service pension scheme.

Three months later, the deal had been improved, with the provision of a car, as well as personal and family membership of a health insurance scheme to be funded by the employer.

In addition, the position would provide access to the pension scheme that applies to CEOs of

offers better terms than those previously on offer.

Two new packages were also created for senior roles on the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board, which is responsible for delivery of the controversial National Children's Hospital where overruns are now expected to bring the final cost to more than €1.7bn.

Records released under a Freedom of Information request show enhanced salaries were being provided in recognition of the 'significant increase in the scale and complexity of the role, the ongoing political, public and media interest in the project and the need to attract top-calibre