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Varadkar pledges swift HIV drug review

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The taoiseach has vowed to make progress on a revolutionary HIV drug by this time next year.

Leo Varadkar told the HIV Ireland Red Ball that he would ensure that the HSE had finished an assessment of the cost of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) on the public health service. The taoiseach was speaking as part of Irish Aids Day 2018.

LGBT activists claim that the long wait for the assessment could lead to hundreds more people being diagnosed with HIV. In 2016 more than 500 people were diagnosed with HIV, the highest rate recorded.

PrEP involves a daily pill of Truvada, which can significantly reduce the chances of being infected when combined with safe sex practices. Trials

have found it to reduce HIV in high-risk individuals by about 86 per cent and it has been recommended by the World Health Organisation.

The drug is not available through the HSE and can cost about €400 for a month's supply privately. Some people have turned to the internet to order generic versions, which can be seized by customs officials. It cannot be publicly available until the HSE finishes the cost assessment.

Mr Varadkar told the inaugural Red Ball event that the government had asked for an assessment of PrEP and there would be one by June next year. "I am confident that we will have one in place next year and I expect no less," Mr Varadkar said.

For those who can afford to access the drug there are only two clinics in Ireland that provide routine monitor-

ing and support for PrEP users. The taoiseach said there was a safety issue about needing to ensure that the people taking PrEP were being appropriately monitored. He said that the HSE sexual health crisis pregnancy programme had set up a broad group to make recommendations on the use of the drug in Ireland.

It recently issued guidance to healthcare professionals on how to care for those who are using PrEP, including those who have been ordering the drug online. "It helps ensure that healthcare

professionals are aware of how best to use PrEP, and that everyone is aware of how best to take PrEP," Mr Varadkar said.

The Red Ball at the Guinness Storehouse was organised to raise funds for those with HIV or Aids in Ireland. Mr Varadkar said that HIV was still one

of the most stigmatised medical conditions.

"This stigma is an additional burden on top of the burden of the disease. This month marks 25 years since the decriminalisation of homosexuality.

Three years since the marriage equality referendum," Mr Varadkar said. "The stigma against gay people is largely lifted. The same must happen for people who are HIV-positive."

ACT UP, an HIV activist group, held a protest outside the Department of the

Taoiseach on Friday calling on Mr Varadkar to find a way around the need for a cost assessment so that PrEP could be made available quicker.

"The HSE's conventional cost-effectiveness evaluation process has failed to deliver PrEP. There has been no progress in Gilead Sciences' application for reimbursement for Truvada as PrEP for almost a year.

"Political leadership is needed to find a way to make PrEP available through HSE immediately, and to reform the HSE cost-effectiveness assessment process to allow it to be driven by public health need and not only commercial interest as is currently the case," it said.

"Political officials must stop hiding behind a broken process. They need to show real leadership and find a way to make PrEP available and accessible now."

€400

Monthly cost of getting pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) privately