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Dear Alice,

Thank you for your email of 24 August 2022 to Maree Todd MSP, Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport, regarding the Women's Health Plan. I work in the Women's Health Plan Team and have been asked to reply.

I would like to thank you for highlighting the work of Neurological Alliance of Scotland, and for sharing the thought-provoking evidence in relation to how neurological conditions are experienced by women and how these conditions are diagnosed.

I want to reassure you that the Scottish Government recognises that symptoms of neurological conditions can present differently amongst a number of neurological conditions. The Clinical Priorities Team in Scottish Government will work collaboratively with the Neurological Alliance of Scotland and relevant colleagues across Scottish Government to ensure that women's experiences of neurological conditions are considered throughout the delivery of the Neurological Care and Support Framework.

As you will appreciate women's health encompasses a wide range of topics and conditions, and we recognise the Women's Health Plan is only one part of much wider picture when it comes to the health and wellbeing of women and girls.

As this is the first iteration of the Women's Health Plan there is a strong focus on creating the conditions to change culture towards women's health and tackle inequalities that have been around for a very long time. This iteration of the Plan prioritises actions to improve healthcare services and women's care and experience, in particular menopause and menstrual health conditions like endometriosis; and to improve collection and use of data, including qualitative evidence of women's lived experiences, to inform service design.

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The actions outlined in the Plan are divided into short term (one year), medium term (one to three years) and long term (three years or more) timescales. Over the past year we have been working to deliver the short term actions outlined in the plan, and in autumn we will be publishing our first annual update to set out the progress made in the first year since the publication of the plan. Some of achievements to highlight include:

- launching a new women's health platform on NHS Inform;
- establishing a specialist menopause service in every mainland health board;
- initiating new research on endometriosis with Wellbeing for Women;
- commissioning the Health and Social Care Alliance to take forward a programme of work on lived experience in order to put the voices of women at the heart of the Plan.
- and increasing the choices that women have to access contraception at community pharmacies.

I can also confirm that we currently considering a number of candidates for the role of the Women's Health Champion and expect to make an announcement about the appointment soon. Further to this, work is happening in the background to progress the establishment of Women's Health Leads in every board, a medium term action due for delivery by September 2024.

The establishment of a Women's Health Research Fund is mentioned in your letter and I thought it would be helpful to advise that this is a long term action set out in the Plan. The aim of the fund will be to work towards closing gaps in scientific and medical knowledge in women's health for both sex specific and non sex-specific condition. This work is currently at the early scoping stages.

In your letter you raise a number of points on how women experience neurological conditions throughout their life course, and in particular highlight concerns around the prescription of sodium valproate to women of reproductive age. The Scottish Government is taking steps that seek to prevent harm as a result of sodium valproate, and to offer those who have been impacted the care they need.

A Teratogenic Medicines Advisory Group has been established and chaired by the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer to look specifically at what further measures can be taken to prevent wider harm as a result of sodium valproate and it will consider other medicines with teratogenic potential. Work is also underway to establish specialist services for those harmed by sodium valproate in Scotland. Scottish Government officials are now in early discussion with Health Boards to consider what services are currently available, identify any gaps and then commission a service delivery model that will support those affected.

Alongside this work, we are also supporting the development of a Scottish Epilepsy Register which will help identify people taking sodium valproate, as well as any other anti-epileptic medicines which have the potential to cause harm. This will then allow interventions to reduce potential harm to be targeted to those at risk. This work is on track to have pregnancy, dispensing, and mortality data linked to an electronic dashboard in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, with adoption in in two other NHS boards as the next phase (NHS Tayside and NHS Lanarkshire). Proposals have been developed to support implementation across all health boards in Scotland.

We agree that Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is a devastating condition that can cause lifelong, permanent and irreversible damage, although early diagnosis and tailored interventions can improve outcomes for the child. We are taking action to reduce the harms caused by alcohol during pregnancy.

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Our Alcohol Framework 2018 includes an action to continue to prevent and reduce the harm caused by alcohol consumption in pregnancy. We continue to progress this work through increasing awareness of the risks of, and improved diagnosis and support for, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Specific work includes promoting health messaging such as the placing of the UK Chief Medical Officers' low risk drinking guidelines of 14 units a week on labels of alcoholic products, and pregnancy warning labels.

We are also supporting pregnant women to understand the dangers of alcohol consumption through Alcohol Brief Interventions. All pregnant women in Scotland are asked about their drinking habits as part of the booking appointment with maternity services and if required, they are also provided with an Alcohol Brief Intervention - a short conversation which aims to get them to think about their alcohol consumption and how they might cut down.

I hope you find this information helpful. We look forward to our continued engagement with Neurological Alliance of Scotland on this important work.

Yours sincerely



Shoba Galloway
CMOPD : Women's Health Plan

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