Almost a thousand women and their GPs in Queensland are being contacted after the Pap Smear Register failed to send out reminders about follow-up tests for low-grade abnormalities.

Chief Health Officer Dr Jeannette Young said a problem with the register's automatic mailing system meant that 980 women who had a Pap smear with a low-grade abnormality did not receive a reminder letter to have a follow-up.

Dr Young (pictured) said the Pap Smear Register was "merely a back-up reminder system" that only sent a follow-up letter if a test result was not received.

"GPs and other Pap smear providers have primary responsibility for following up with their patient as they are advised directly by pathology companies of the outcome of their patient's results," she said.

"We are working with them to make sure these women have been followed-up and to keep the Pap Smear Register up-to-date."

According to Dr Young, the department believed that in most cases, a follow-up Pap smear had occurred, but the information had not been submitted to the register.

"All women affected by the issue will be contacted by Queensland Health, so if you do not receive a letter there is no need for you to do anything other than to continue your normal screening regimen."
A spokeswoman said the department had already contacted about 450 women and their Pap smear providers, and was now trying to make contact with all remaining women affected by the issue.

According to the Courier Mail, the problem was picked up when a patient reported she had not received a reminder letter after an abnormal result.

External consultants were then brought in to do an assessment of the register.

Dr Sara Bird, manager of medicolegal and advisory services at MDA National, said Queensland Health was correct in saying it was a GP’s responsibility to inform a woman of an abnormal or clinically significant Pap smear result, and to advise a follow-up test at the recommended interval.

However, it was reasonable for GPs to expect the Pap Smear Register to send a reminder letter if the patient did not attend in the recommended time frame.

“This is very disappointing — GPs should be able to rely on the system as a back-up,” she told Australian Doctor.

The failure of the reminder system might not be a problem if it only affected Pap test results dating back some months, she said, but the consequences could be more severe if the problem had persisted for many years, with the potential for low-grade abnormalities to progress to more advanced disease.

“With a failure like this, some GPs might want to go back and look again at their reminder systems,” Dr Bird said.