01 December 2011

Mr. Jerry Buttimer, T.D.
Dáil Éireann,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2.

Dear Deputy Buttimer,

The Health Service Executive (HSE) South has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the following Parliamentary Question (Ref No. 35980/11) which you submitted to the Minister for Health and Children for response:

“To ask the Minister for Health the steps that have been taken towards establishing a stroke unit at Cork University Hospital; when the unit will be open and staff assigned to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”

The national guidelines on stroke care as outlined in Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019 (published in 2010) recommend that all hospitals providing care for acute stroke patients must make available immediate access to an acute stroke unit. An acute stroke unit consists of a discrete area of a hospital that exclusively or principally takes care of stroke patients and is adequately staffed by a specialist multidisciplinary team. An acute stroke unit provides high-dependency care including physiological, neurological monitoring and rapid treatment of stroke and associated complications, early rehabilitation and palliative care. The nursing staff within a stroke unit develop the crucial expertise on appropriate stroke patients assessment, treatment, monitoring & management. Stroke unit care is underpinned by a comprehensive specialist multidisciplinary team including speech and language therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, clinical nutrition, social work and clinical psychology.

As you are aware the HSE has established a number of clinical care programmes to improve and standardise patient care throughout the organisation by bringing together clinical disciplines and enabling them to share innovative solutions to deliver greater benefits to every user of HSE services. One of these programmes has been established in the area of stroke care. The National Stroke Programme plan identifies the development of Stroke Units in all acute hospitals currently without units, who admit patients with stroke via the ED, with prioritisation of hospitals with high numbers of stroke admissions annually. It is estimated that development of 9 additional Stroke Units will result in 90% of all acute Irish hospitals operating a stroke Unit and 90% of all Irish patients with a stroke admitted to a hospital with a functional unit.

Patients with acute stroke care needs attending Cork University Hospital (CUH) who are over 65 years of age are assessed and admitted by the geriatric medicine service. Stroke patients under 65 are admitted by the neurology service. Patients, if deemed appropriate, have access to high end diagnostics including CT, MRI, intervention radiography, thrombolytic therapy. In the post acute phase of the treatment patients have access to Allied Health Professionals/Multidisciplinary team in a timely fashion. The rehabilitation phase of treatment for patients over 65 years predominantly takes place at St. Finbarr’s Hospital. Patients under 65 of age years are usually rehabilitated in CUH itself or are transferred to the National Rehabilitation Hospital, Dun Laoghaire. Every effort is made to rehabilitate these patients to their full potential and CUH works closely with the MDT and voluntary groups in the community to achieve discharge home if at all possible.

While CUH presently provides a comprehensive service to stroke patient as outlined above, there is a requirement now to admit these patients to a dedicated unit in line with national policy. To facilitate this CUH has been allocated €24,250 to support infrastructural changes that will be required to develop a dedicated stroke unit. Work on the infrastructural changes is at an advanced stage and it is anticipated that the unit will be in place by January 2012. When complete, the stroke unit within CUH will meet the criteria set down by the national programme.
Funding has also been provided under the clinical care programmes to put a number of support posts in place. CUH has been allocated the following posts:

- Clinical Nurse Specialist x 1 WTE
- Physiotherapist x 0.5 WTE
- Speech & Language Therapist x 0.5 WTE

The recruitment of these posts is being progressed at national level.

In addition to the above, CUH has received approval for the recruitment of three additional consultant neurologist posts under the clinical care programmes, two for the adult service and one for the paediatric service.

- Consultant Neurologist x 2 WTE (Adult service) –
  - Consultant 1 will take up the post in December 2011
  - Consultant 2 will take up the post in January 2012
- Consultant Neurologist x 1 WTE (Paediatric service) – Recruitment process is ongoing and it is anticipated that this consultant will be in place in Q2 2012

In recent years, the benefits of organised clinical services for stroke care have been clearly established. Hospital-based Stroke Units for acute and initial rehabilitation of patients with stroke and transient ischemic attack (mini-stroke) are associated with a reduction in death and institutional care of stroke patients. The development of a dedicated stroke unit at Cork University Hospital, along with new techniques and strategies for improving the care of people with stroke, will ensure the hospital will continue to provide the best possible care for victims of stroke in the region.

Yours sincerely,

Ger Reaney
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