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15<sup>th</sup> November 2019

Deputy Martin  
Dáil Éireann  
Leinster House  
Dublin 2

**PQ Ref 43909/19\*\*** To ask the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that in 2018 a team from hospitals (details supplied) carried out two operations on the damaged spinal cords of babies in the womb, the first surgeries of their kind in the UK; if such specialist foetal surgery for spina bifida will be available in here; if it is likely to become available under the treatment abroad scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Martin,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Question, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response. I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position.

I apologise for the delay in responding to you.

Fetal surgery for spina bifida is a relatively new procedure; the first being done in 1998. The value of this procedure in carefully selected cases was confirmed by the MOMs Study (Adzick et al, 2011). Because of the limited number of cases and the intricate nature of the surgery, it makes sense to centralise this procedure and would be preferable to refer those who require treatment abroad.

In general the Treatment Abroad Scheme (TAS) allows public patients access to healthcare in the public healthcare system of another EU/EEA country or Switzerland via funding from the HSE. There are specific criteria to be met to qualify for funding under the TAS and the overriding criteria is that the treatment is deemed not to be available in Ireland, is a proven form of treatment and is not contrary to Irish legislation, etc. The availability of access to treatments in the EU/EEA/Switzerland via the TAS is very important to patients in the overall provision of public healthcare in Ireland as it gives public patients access to treatments which are not available in Ireland.

Reference: Adzick N.S., Thom E.A., Spong C.Y., Brock J.W. 3rd, Burrows P.K., Johnson M.P., Howell L.J., Farrell J.A., Dabrowiak M.E., Sutton L.N., Gupta N., Tulipan N.B., D'Alton M.E., Farmer D.L. (2011) A randomised trial of prenatal versus postnatal repair of myelomeningocele. *N Engl J Med*; 364: 993-1004.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary-Jo Biggs'.

**Mary-Jo Biggs,**  
General Manager, National Women and Infants Health Programme