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Deputy Carroll MacNeill  
Dáil Éireann,  
Leinster House  
Dublin 2

**PQ Ref 14349/20 To ask the Minister for Health the data from maternity and other hospitals relating to a reduction in the number of preterm births to date in 2020 relative to the equivalent period in previous years; if this has possible significant implications for maternal and neonatal health and related health advice; and if he make a statement on the matter.**

Dear Deputy Carroll MacNeill,

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.

Recent media reports have identified one Irish maternity hospital which has reported a reduction in the incidence of very low birth weight infants during the first four months in 2020. The report suggested that the reduction in the prematurity rate may be due to maternal life-style changes during the pandemic lockdown. It is an interesting observation; however it needs to be interpreted with caution. It is based on small numbers, in one institution, and over a short period of time.

The informal communication from the other large Irish maternity hospitals is that they have not experienced a reduction in their prematurity rates during the equivalent time period. Thus a national inference cannot be drawn.

A formal, qualified comment on this issue is not possible until all the annual perinatal data for the entirety of 2020 from all maternity services has been submitted, confirmed and processed by the relevant agencies, such as the National Perinatal Epidemiology Centre and the Healthcare Pricing Office, as per normal processes. The full report on this data will be available in the second half of 2021.

I trust this clarifies the matter at this point in time.

Yours sincerely,

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