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7th July 2020

Deputy Ryan
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ Ref 12225/20 To ask the Minister for Health when antenatal classes will resume; his plans to allow fathers to participate fully with their partners in maternity appointments and services; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Ryan,

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.

To reduce footfall through maternity units, visiting restrictions were implemented at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in all public maternity services, similar to measures taken in relation to other public health services. The objective of these restrictions was to reduce the impact of the infection on mothers, babies and staff.

The step of restricting visitors was implemented as part of a suite of actions taken by maternity services to ensure that essential care to women and their babies continued in such a way that any risk to their wellbeing was kept to an absolute minimum. Other actions taken by services included increased use of tele-consultations, additional clinics being provided in the community, clinics being held in larger spaces and areas in the hospitals etc.

Early in the course of the pandemic a high percentage of staff were unable to attend due to concerns over the infection. As is well known a high percentage of people with Covid-19 proven infections were front line healthcare workers. At one stage, maternity services were under significant due to the high numbers of staff affected.

Fortunately, notwithstanding that a small number of mothers were very unwell, the issue of staff being infected has improved, with Covid-19 not having had a major impact on the ability of maternity services to continue to care for women and their babies safely, probably in part to the visiting restrictions imposed.

As the number of infected cases in the community becomes less it can be anticipated that visiting restrictions on fathers will be eased. The maternity community, midwifery and obstetrics, are very keen to return to what was previously the status quo if this can be facilitated safely.

The maternity community is also acutely aware of their responsibilities in keeping the hospital environment as safe as possible for mothers and babies and staff. It is not possible to put precise timelines as to when the restrictions will be lifted in totality as this depends on the progress of the disease in our community which although encouraging is unpredictable. Additionally, different hospitals and services may have to respond differently in line with locally emerging issues.

Specifically in relation to antenatal classes, the continued provision of these classes has proven challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic, again in the context of ensuring the safety of women, their partners and staff. With a view to continuing to make this support available to women, a number of sites have continued to provide these classes in larger settings with smaller numbers in attendance so as to enable appropriate social distancing, whilst other sites and services have endeavoured to provide these classes on line. The HSE is continuing to look at this area of service provision in terms of how best to provide this service safely, whilst supporting maximising participation and uptake, in the context of the new environment it must now be delivered in.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



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