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13th July 2020

Deputy Cairns,
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ Ref 13503/20 To ask the Minister for Health when women will have access to full prenatal, maternity and postnatal services; and when family visits to maternity hospitals will resume.

Dear Deputy Cairns,

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.

Care of pregnant women has continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, with maternity services focusing on providing that care in as safe a manner as possible for women, their babies and the staff of services. Similar to all other services in health, challenges have presented over the last number of months. To manage and address these, a number of initiatives have been introduced in 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. These include:

- Services managing antenatal care through increased use of tele-consultations;
- Accurate time slots being provided for antenatal appointments;
- Clinics being held in larger spaces and areas in hospitals;
- Additional antenatal and postnatal clinics being provided in the community away from the acute maternity service sites;
- Expansion of early transfer home services after birth, thereby enabling women to return safely to their homes with their babies and be provided with midwifery care in the safety of their own homes; and
- Increased availability of information on line by hospitals of information and guidance that would ordinarily be provided in a face to face manner.

A central response to the pandemic by maternity services was to reduce footfall through maternity units, with visiting restrictions being 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.

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 considerable proportion of people with Covid-19 proven infections were front line healthcare workers. At one stage, maternity services were under significant pressures 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 no small part to the visiting restrictions imposed.

As the number of infected cases in the community becomes less it can be anticipated that visiting restrictions will be eased. This easing of restrictions is already happening in a limited manner in a small number of maternity services further to local assessments. 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 and public health advice.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



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