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9th December 2020

Deputy Matt Carthy
Dáil Éireann,
Kildare Street,
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Re: PQ 39106/20 To ask the Minister for Health if updates requested by NOCT from the Netherlands and Germany in relation to its Covid-19 outbreak investigations have been received; if he will provide such updates; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Carthy

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question which has been referred by the Minister for Health to the Health Service Executive for direct response.

Early in the development of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of outbreaks of COVID-19 disease were identified in Meat Processing Plants (MPPs) in Ireland. Given the scale of MPP outbreaks and the associated burden of disease in workers, a National Outbreak Control Team (NOCT) was established to summarise the situation nationally, review the evidence on investigation and control measures, ensure consistency of approach and develop national guidance.

As part of the initial investigation of the NOCT, HPSC, as ECDC (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control) National Focal Point (NFP) was requested to seek any information on similar outbreaks in MPPs from EU/EEA colleagues via the EU's Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) Selective Exchange platform on 11/5/2020. Positive responses were received from Germany and the Netherlands.

In Ireland, while there were early strong indications that MPPs appeared to be the primary locations of the outbreaks, these other EU countries (the Netherlands and Germany) were of the opinion, prior to undertaking research into the issue, that the communal accommodation and travel arrangements of their (largely) migrant worker populations were likely to be the sources of their outbreaks, which were then imported into the MPPs.

In Ireland, while it was felt likely that the primary location of most outbreaks was within the MPPs, there was also likely to be a significant contribution from spread in the wider community. It was determined that within MPPs, there were significant numbers of process/structural factors that could readily serve to facilitate internal spread of SARS-CoV-2, that could be amenable to correction, leading to a lower risk of COVID-19 spread. Following review of the evidence gathered by the NOCT, there was a moderately high degree of confidence that the primary point of amplification of most of the outbreaks was most likely to be within the MPPs, while acknowledging the complexity of potential exchange of infection between MPPs and local external locations.

In May, Dutch authorities undertook research within their plants, and they found inactive SARS-CoV-2 (the virus responsible for COVID-19) particles in investigating a small number of meat plants. The virus was found primarily on hand-touch surfaces (such as door handles, coffee machine displays and toilet soap dispensers). Updates from the Netherlands and Germany in relation to their outbreak investigations were requested at this time.

Germany has not responded directly to us on the likely source of their MPP outbreaks, but recently the Netherlands has reverted to say that they have been liaising with German colleagues (the two countries bus some MMP workers across their common border). Dutch colleagues informed us that they had recently assessed two outbreaks of COVID-19 IN MPPs. Investigation of their MPP outbreaks indicated that management had taken adequate measures to avoid spreading of COVID-19, prior to the outbreaks. They concluded there was no indication of spread within the plants. As Dutch MPPs have high levels of migrant workers, it was again hypothesised that migrant workers became infected during transport in minibuses or in their communal accommodation in clustered group houses.

It should be pointed out that there are differences between the Dutch and Irish situations. Dutch MPPs have higher proportions of migrant workers living in communal accommodation than is the case in Ireland. In addition, the Dutch investigations occurred at a time when the MPPs had already imposed stringent control measures designed to limit the spread of COVID-19 internally.

In Ireland, rapidly applied outbreak control measures at a local level by Departments of Public Health, coupled with rigorous application of the guidance contained in the document [COVID-19 Outbreaks in Meat Factories in Ireland](#), meant that MPP COVID-19 outbreaks were quickly controlled. While it is likely that the outbreaks in MPPs in Ireland were a combination of amplification within the plants, bolstered by ongoing community outbreaks, control measures within the plants are likely to have made an important contribution to the reduction seen in these outbreaks.

If you require any further information or clarification please do contact us.

Yours sincerely,



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