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Deputy McGrath
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ Ref 22788/20 To ask the Minister for Health if his Department and the HSE will review and relax their admissions policy for maternity hospitals and wards to allow new fathers attend the post-natal ward to be with their partner and newborn child or children in view of the fact the policy was revoked at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy McGrath,

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.

Maternity services are committed to ensuring that to the best of their ability the impact of Covid-19 on services and the pregnancy experience of every mother and their partner should be kept to an absolute minimum wherever feasible. Every restriction and deviation from normal practice across the country is a cause of concern and regret at local and national level.

In responding to the Covid-19 pandemic maternity services have put the safety of women, their babies and maternity staff at the centre of all decision making and risk assessments. Maternity services are a core, essential health service and as such need to be able to continue to provide 24/7 care to all women requiring it as the country continues to deal with Covid-19.

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 step of restricting visitors and individuals accompanying women to their appointments 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.

Notwithstanding that a small number of mothers were very unwell, we have been fortunate in Ireland not to have had any maternal or neonatal mortality as a result of Covid-19. Additionally the issue of staff being infected or being required to self-isolate has improved significantly. One factor that has led to these outcomes is a meticulous adherence to measures that reduced footfall in our maternity units.

The management of visiting regulations during a pandemic must be undertaken with extreme care within our maternity services. Covid-19 is highly infectious and its effects, as seen to date, can be devastating. The infection can be passed very easily from person to person and the use of public spaces (especially internal spaces) and episodes of close contacts increase that risk significantly.

Decisions regarding visiting practices must be based on risk assessments that need to factor in a multitude of factors, many of which will be unique to each site and service. Such factors include national and local pandemic risks and trends and incidences, physical layout and design of infrastructure in each service, use of shared spaces with other services, overall footfall on the site, requirement to support social distancing, staffing levels etc.

Working closely with their local infection control team, each local maternity service and maternity network must undertake these risk assessments which are a fundamental part of ensuring a safe system and service for women, their babies, staff and visitors. These risk assessments are continually reviewed with decisions being made regarding visiting restrictions at local and maternity network level based on same.

Maternity services and their dedicated staff are acutely aware of how unique the pregnancy journey is for each woman and her family and are mindful how the presence of loved ones can offer unique support and care in this journey. They are also acutely aware of the absolute need to ensure that they can continue to provide a safe 24/7 service to women and their babies during the course of this pandemic and the potential devastating impact that high rates of staff illness may have on their ability to do so, particularly in very specialised areas of the service.

The current situation in relation to the pandemic is very fluid and dynamic such that as information and circumstances change, so too will the responses by maternity services at local level.

The HSE readily acknowledges the anxieties and frustrations these restrictions have caused for women and their partners, at what should be the happiest time in their lives. However, hospitals and maternity services must prioritise the safety of all patients and staff, and do everything possible to ensure hospitals are protected from the ever-present threat of COVID-19 and are positioned to continue to provide a full 24/7 service.

It is simply not possible for the HSE at either national or local level to put precise timelines as to when the visiting restrictions will be lifted in their totality as this depends on the progress of the disease in our community which as seen in recent times is unpredictable. All involved in the provision of maternity care look forward to the time when services can revert to a more open door policy.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



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