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9th February 2021

Deputy Richmond,
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ Ref 4599/21 To ask the Minister for Health his plans to maintain lactation consultancy services throughout the Covid-19 crisis and restriction; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Richmond,

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.

The HSE is committed to protecting, supporting and promoting breastfeeding. Given the extraordinary circumstances of the Covid-19 global pandemic, there may be variations in some maternity support services in the community, as local service providers work to adhere to public health measures to minimise risks and ensure the safety of families and staff. We appreciate the patience shown by families as we work through these difficult months, providing high-quality maternity and infant care and keeping our patients and services safe from COVID-19.

Midwives and Public Health Nurses are trained and are skilled in supporting breastfeeding commencing in the antenatal period with the delivery of antenatal/breastfeeding education. Midwives support mothers to establish breastfeeding immediately after birth and help mothers learn the skill of breastfeeding in the immediate post natal period. Public Health Nurses, many of whom are Midwives and Paediatric Nurses, are also trained and skilled in providing breastfeeding support throughout the post natal period.

Integrating routine lactation consultant support improves the experience of mothers receiving care and breastfeeding initiation and duration rates. Breastfeeding clinics and online breastfeeding support meetings are provided by the HSE and HSE funded voluntary breastfeeding organisations around the country. Facilitators of these groups have International Board Certified Lactation Consultant qualifications or are experienced trained peer counsellors.

There are 29 Whole Time Equivalent dedicated Lactation Consultant posts across Maternity Hospitals and units and Public Health Nursing services to provide specialised care for mothers experiencing challenges with breastfeeding. They also support the development of skills and knowledge of other front line colleagues. This represents an increase of 11.5 Whole Time Equivalent Lactation Consultant

posts in the last 4 years. It is acknowledged that these numbers are low when compared with international staffing benchmarks and there are gaps in availability throughout the country. A further 5.5 dedicated lactation consultant posts have been funded through the National Maternity Strategy and are expected to be in post in 2021.

Other supports have been developed during the pandemic, with a number of hospital antenatal breastfeeding classes and some breastfeeding groups run by the HSE and voluntary organisations moving online. Over 60 virtual breastfeeding support group meetings are held each month. Phone and virtual breastfeeding support is also being made available to replace face-to-face appointments, while face-to-face one-to-ones are being provided where needed. The HSE run a free online breastfeeding advice and information service staffed by experienced lactation consultants 7 days a week. There was a 38% increase in demand for the service in 2020 with almost 4,000 breastfeeding questions answered via live chat or e-mail.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



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