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10th February 2021

Deputy Cairns
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ Ref 4947/21: To ask the Minister for Health if the current guidance from the National Women and Infants Health Programme will be made available to maternity hospitals and services regarding restrictions on partners and accompanying persons attending the labour and prenatal appointments in the maternity services; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

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.

Since the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic, maternity services have been 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 deeply regretted at local and national level. 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.

COVID infection in pregnant women is potentially serious. Many countries, including England, have recorded maternal deaths with COVID infection and pregnancy. To date we are fortunate that no maternal death associated with COVID has been reported here. This welcome outcome is due to the underlying infection rate in the community, the characteristics of the population and the application of rigorous preventive measures in the maternity community.

Please see attached, a copy of a document from the HSE entitled ‘Visiting Practices in Maternity Services’. This document was developed by the National Women and Infants Health Programme and circulated to all Maternity Services during Quarter 3 of 2020.

As you may be aware, in early December the HSE reclassified partners as “essential accompanying person” for the purpose of the anatomy scan, which is usually done at 20 weeks. At that point in time, all maternity services were endeavouring to facilitate this bearing in mind this may be difficult due to underlying infection rates in both the community and hospital staff. Additionally there may be infrastructural issues with some scanning facilities that will make compliance with infection control

difficult. Where hospitals were unable to facilitate partners they have been asked to document their reasons and review the circumstances weekly.

However, on foot of the third wave of the pandemic that the country is currently experiencing and the exceptional high rates of community transmission being recorded and its impact on the provision of health service, all maternity services have had to again review the level of access to their sites for partners in light of both patient and staff safety.

At present services continue to facilitate the presence of birthing partners during delivery, however access by birthing partners during the anomaly scan and for postnatal visits have been significant curtailed across the majority of maternity services given the exceptional high rates of community transmission. Access to Neonatal Intensive Care Units by parents continues to be facilitated albeit in a very structured and controlled manner so as to minimise risk to babies and staff.

It is important to note that the levels of restrictions in place at any point in time in maternity services are subject to continual review by service providers, with all services undertaking an active review of same on at least a weekly basis, with some service reviewing same on a daily basis. These deliberations are informed both by the current significant challenges that the health service is facing in relation to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic but also in relation to the on-going roll out of the vaccination programme both to front line healthcare providers and ultimately the general population which will inform further on-going reviews of the position both from a patient and staff safety perspective.

Throughout the pandemic every maternity service has remained acutely aware and very sensitive to specific situations regarding pregnancy loss, still birth and unexpected complications. It is readily acknowledged that these are outcomes and circumstances that affect women and their partners significantly. It is not possible for services to have advanced knowledge as to which women will be receiving distressing and upsetting news. However as and when these situations arise or are known or suspected in advance, maternity services will endeavour in these situations to ensure that women have the on-site support of their partner.

All involved in the provision of maternity services are aware of the difficulty and distress that the current restrictions on accompanying persons due to COVID 19 have caused. All service providers look forward to the restoration of normal visiting and the accommodation of partners.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



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