



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

Office of the Chief Clinical Officer
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Oifig an Phríomhoifigigh Cliniúil
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BY EMAIL ONLY

Deputy Mick Barry TD

Dáil Éireann
Leinster House
Kildare Street
Dublin 2
Email:

21/04/2021

PQ 17551-21 To ask the Minister for Health the specific measures or set of measures that the HSE brought in in advance of the third wave of Covid-19 that demonstrably reduced in the third wave mortality rate compared to the mortality rates seen in each of the first two waves in nursing homes and other residential care units runs by the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. -

Dear Deputy Barry

The Covid 19 pandemic was a time of huge and rapid learning in the Irish healthcare system. This learning impacted significantly on our ability as clinicians to recognise the signs of Covid 19 in very frail older patients, which were often very different and atypical of those in younger patients. It also informed our understanding of the important role of asymptomatic transmission which was unknown at the start of the pandemic and the importance of serial testing in monitoring for the presence of the virus in those who are asymptomatic as introduced in April 2020.

At all times the learning was rapidly shared and acted on. The prioritisation of the vaccine programme in residential care settings represented and maximised the learning by ensuring that residents and staff in these facilities were the first to be protected against the virus.

Once this virus exists in the community, it's impossible to prevent transmission around any healthcare setting, or nursing home. When it gets into a healthcare setting, it's hugely transmissible hence the importance of infection prevention and control processes to protect residents patients and staff.

Twenty three (23) Covid Response Teams (CRTs), were formed in March 2020 to support Public Health Outbreak teams covering all residential services as well as Home Support settings. CRTs are active in all 9 Community Healthcare Organisations (CHOs) providing available on-going expert advice and support including

- telephone support;
- on-site visits and assessments;
- access to PPE supply lines;
- IPC and Public Health advice; and
- training materials to ensure nursing homes are compliant with HIQA IPC Standards.

CRTs include specialist expertise for Older People and Residential care including Consultant Geriatricians, Directors of Nursing, Residential Care services, Public Health personnel, Nursing and administrative supports. Staff from local centres of nursing and midwifery education support any training requirements. CRTs have the operational direction to deploy resources as required and to

escalate any concerns to the Area Crisis Management Team. There has also been a cross sectoral approach to education and communication. A significant focus of the response was to ensure that there was a significant communications and education campaign that was informed by learning from the pandemic. This included

1. Frequently updated clinical guidance hosted on the HSE website in clinical guidance repository
2. Frequently updated infection and prevention control guidance on the HPSC website
3. Series of webinars from March 2020 and ongoing to support care in nursing homes to GPs, nursing, care staff, residents and families (include link to same)
4. Development of website area on HSE website dedicated to NH care issues

Serial testing across Nursing Homes continues to run on fortnightly cycles and staff are tested and where there is a level of positive staff of concern, residents of the facility may all be tested or only those who have had close contact with the relevant staff. An eighth cycle of testing started on Feb 1st with the positivity rate at 0.9. The positivity rates from each round of testing are examined to watch for centres of concern in addition to our local CRT and HIQA based data and information on all outbreaks. All of the open outbreaks in these facilities are being closely monitored to assure a safe and stable operation of the service. We are aware also of the number of reported outbreaks in facilities across

The Nursing Homes Expert Panel

The Nursing Homes Expert Panel was appointed by the Minister for Health in May 2020 and published the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel Report on 19th August 2020. This Report contains a range of recommendations, across 15 themes, in line with the lessons learned to date and international best practice aimed at safeguarding the residents in nursing homes over the next 12-18 months and into the longer term.

The COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel Report placed a considerable onus on the HSE to implement significant changes in relation to both how we provide services to patients directly in our care, as well as how we support other providers to ensure that the required standard of care is delivered to each person.

- There are 86 recommendations in total, of which 68 involve the HSE as the accountable body.
- Many of these 68 recommendations have already commenced or form part of HSE plans for the immediate future.
- 5 Workstreams have been established to drive implementation of these recommendations across the HSE.

The HSE is working with health sector partners to implement the recommendations of the Expert Panel. Current focus includes the development of updated structures and processes for infection control in this sector, building on the learning and changes that have been implemented since March 2020. It includes ongoing work to develop Integrated Community Support Teams, building on the work of the CRTs, who worked to manage our extensive support for public and private nursing homes during 2020. It also includes the longer term development of a national programme to improve end-of-life and palliative care in nursing homes. Updates on the recommendations and progress reports on implementation are provided here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3af5a-covid-19-nursing-homes-expert-panel-final-report/>

The dramatic reduction in Covid 19 cases within nursing homes in response to the vaccination campaign in Jan / Feb has demonstrated the powerful impact of this vaccination campaign with extraordinarily high levels of uptake in residents and staff. This has allowed some semblance of



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normality to return to these care settings with return to in-person visitation now in progress and further improvements envisaged as the national vaccination campaign gains momentum.

I hope this provides you with assistance,

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sharon Hayden'.

Sharon Hayden
General Manager
Office of the CCO