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Deputy O'Brien,
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ51132/21: To ask the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the removal of all restrictions for partners attending appointments with patients in maternity units; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy O'Brien,

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 the impact of Covid-19 on services and the pregnancy experience for every mother and their partner is kept to a minimum. Pregnant women are no more likely to be diagnosed with Covid-19 in comparison to non-pregnant women. However if they are diagnosed with Covid-19, they are more likely to have serious complications than non-pregnant women. The recent association between COVID placentitis and still birth underlines the importance of keeping maternity services as safe as possible.

The HSE prioritises the health and safety of its service users and its staff. Managing the infection risks within our maternity service is paramount to providing a safe service to the women who use the maternity services and their babies. Managing the risk of infection has to take account of the fact that many maternity services work within hospitals with infrastructural challenges. Taking these challenges into account it was and is necessary for the HSE to develop guidance on visiting in maternity hospitals that seeks to balance the competing requirements for partners to be present to support women but also giving priority to the safety, welfare and privacy of all women and infants that use the service, and its staff.

The guidance on visiting, including partners in the maternity context, is provided by the HSE's Anti-Microbial Infection Prevention and Control (AMRIC) team. This guidance is updated regularly, in line with the changing circumstances of the pandemic, the prevailing transmission rates and the level of vaccination in the population. The most recent update was issued on 3rd September 2021 for implementation on the 13th September 2021.

The AMRIC's guidance for hospitals advises that where possible visiting should be planned in advance, should avoid heavy footfall in the hospital and wards at any one time, and visitors should avoid interacting with other visitors or patients they are not visiting. In addition to the generic hospital guidance, there is specific guidance for maternity services. The current guidance can be found at:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/guidanceforhealthcareworkers/acutehospitalsguidance/Guidance%20on%20Access%20to%20Acute%20Hospitals%20for%20Nominated%20Support%20Partners.pdf>

It is important to note that the above guidance is applicable where the partner/accompanying person does not have symptoms of Covid-19.

Proof of vaccination of nominated support partners and testing of asymptomatic nominated support partners in advance of access is not required.

The HSE and Hospital Groups continue to publish the position in relation to each unit's compliance with the official HSE AMRIC clinical guidance. The current status of each hospital's appointments and visiting restrictions can be found on <https://www2.hse.ie/services/hospital-service-disruptions/hospital-service-disruptions-covid19.html>

Visits have been arranged with individual units over the next several weeks to assess their compliance and to see what reasons, if any, present them with difficulty in compliance. Risk assessments have been undertaken and are available within each maternity service in circumstances where it is not possible to comply with the current clinical guidance.

The HSE and Hospital Groups have robust processes in place to oversee compliance with the guidance, address the woman's immediate concerns and facilitate maximum access for her nominated support partner. Every effort is being made by the maternity services to facilitate maximum access to the nominated support partners to ensure a safe service continues to be provided to the woman, her baby and the staff providing the service.

In the context of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, a further review of the HSE AMRIC guidance is ongoing. It is envisaged in the coming weeks that access for nominated support partners for in patients will be further enhanced.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



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