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Deputy Haughey
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ Ref 46643/22: To ask the Minister for Health if water birth will be made available in Ireland; the reason that the facilitation of water births has ceased; if the necessary reviews on this issue have been completed; if home births can be facilitated for all those who want to avail of such a service; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Haughey,

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.

Whilst the Home Birth Service is small relative to the overall birthing numbers in Ireland the HSE and its National Women and Infants Health Programme recognise that it is an important pathway for women. The objectives of the HSE regarding the HSE Homebirth Service is both to enable women a choice of care pathway whilst at all times providing a service that is safe for both mothers and their babies in line with the objectives of the National Maternity Strategy.

In relation to water births, following a small number of incidents in the HSE National Homebirth Service, the HSE in the interest of the health and safety of women and babies, has temporarily paused facilitating planned water births in the community in its home birth service. Access to all other components of the HSE Homebirth service remains in place, with women continuing to be supported to immerse in water for the purposes of labour.

The pause on the provision of delivering a baby in water in the community will remain in place pending the outcome of the investigations into the two incidents being finalised and thereafter being considered by the HSE in terms of learnings identified and recommendations made being responded to in a structured manner.

The HSE appreciates that this may be disappointing for women and their families who had planned on having a water birth at home. However the HSE is committed to providing safe and effective care during pregnancy and birth and it is for this reason that this decision was made while the reviews are undertaken.

It is estimated by the HSE that the water birth component of the HSE National Homebirth Service is approximately accessed by on average 40 women per year.

Whilst this pause on water births in the community is in place, the HSE's National Women and Infants Health Programme (NWIHP) continues to support the provision of water births in hospitals as part of a core component of maternity services.

In line with the National Maternity Strategy, whilst planning continues in each Hospital Group for the development of a new Alongside Birth Centre, NWIHP has invested extensively in designated spaces, Home-Away-From-Home Birthing Suites, being established within or adjacent to existing labour wards, so as to provide women with a birthing environment that supports a physiological childbirth experience.

The provision of birthing and labouring pools is a key element of these birthing suites, with NWIHP targeting that wherever feasible from an infrastructure perspective that all 19 maternity services would have in place the option of labouring and ultimately birthing in water.

NWIHP is currently recruiting for a project lead at national level to support maternity services in Ireland to plan for and deliver water births/water immersion as part of the ongoing implementation of the National maternity Strategy, with specific reference to extending the capacity of the supported care pathway.

In terms of facilitating homebirth, the HSE homebirth service is available free to women to meet the criteria for access to the service in terms of assessing their suitability vis-à-vis the HSE's objective to deliver a safe service.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



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