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9th February 2023

Deputy Hourigan
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ 4313/23: To ask the Minister for Health his plans to develop a governance structure for breastfeeding in primary care and acute hospitals divisions; if he will appoint dedicated full-time lactation consultants in each of the nine Community Health Organisations, according to population need; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ 4314/23: To ask the Minister for Health his plans to develop a clear referral pathway for mothers requiring additional breastfeeding support before and after birth, to lactation consultants; his plans to implement evidence informed programmes and initiatives to promote breastfeeding, provide support and address barriers for women least likely to breastfeed, with a particular focus on young mothers under the age of 18 years and women in the Traveller community; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Hourigan.

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Questions, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response. I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position on the various areas and issues you raised.

Educating and supporting mothers to learn and establish breastfeeding is a key objective of the HSE. There are multiple strands of support and work programmes in place within the HSE to support this objective, including antenatal classes on breastfeeding and the provision of the ‘*My pregnancy Book*’ being offered to all expectant parents.

There is also extensive information available on the ‘*My child website*’ including but not limited to:

- How to breastfeed;
- Positioning while breastfeeding;
- Remedies for bad latch and sore nipples;
- Items needed and how to use them; and
- Feeding options including breast, combi and formula.

It contains almost 50 breastfeeding advice pages, which deal with issues experienced by parents as they learn this new skill with their baby. It offers a service called ‘*ask our breastfeeding expert*’ where one can speak with and seek advice from a lactation consultant via live chat or email. The website also provides information on breastfeeding support groups that are available around the country. The site was designed based on extensive user research and feedback from parents.

The HSE promotes optimising breast milk as much as possible and supports the variety of means in which babies can be fed i.e. exclusive breastfeeding, expressed breast milk feeding, donor milk where indicated, combination breastfeeding and formula feeding.

Midwives and public health nurses provide routine infant feeding support to women and their babies. The role of the dedicated lactation consultant posts is to provide care to those who need additional support due to complexities, challenges or concerns that have arisen with infant feeding. These mothers will have specific lactation concerns and breastfeeding needs. These specialist lactation posts will identify and agree appropriate referral pathways for mothers with complex needs.

There are currently 45 full time dedicated lactation consultant posts approved and funded across maternity hospitals and public health nursing services to provide specialised care for mothers experiencing such challenges with breastfeeding. This represents an increase of 28 lactation consultant posts in the last 4 years. The HSE, via its National Women and Infants Health Programme also recruited a national lead at the end of 2021 to support implementation of the recently published HSE's National Standards for Infant Feeding within Maternity Services.

The NWIHP continues to work closely with the 19 maternity services to improve care provided to women during the pregnancy journey, with particular emphasis being placed on strengthening midwifery provided care and care in the community.

Specifically in relation to postnatal care, one initiative that NWIHP is developing and deploying is the establishment of "Postnatal Hubs" in the community. The concept of the community hub is that it is a local centre where women can access various elements of care relevant to their postnatal journey. As these hubs develop, it is planned that the services available in these hubs or that can be easily accessed by women via these hubs will include perinatal mental health, lactation support, postnatal education, specialist pelvic floor physiotherapy services, etc.

I trust this clarifies the matter and provides reassurance as to the level of commitment that the HSE has to enabling and supporting increased breastfeeding rates in Ireland.

Yours sincerely,



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