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07th June 2023

Deputy O'Reilly
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ 24496/23: To ask the Minister for Health if he will provide information on the financial supports being made annually to support breastfeeding in hospitals; if he will provide information on the financial supports being made annually to support breastfeeding in the community; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy O'Reilly.

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.

Lactation Consultant Posts

With a view to enabling greater access to lactation consultant posts, a total of 34.5 additional infant feeding/lactation posts were approved through the National Maternity Strategy by NWIHP and the Department of Health between 2020 and 2021, building on specialist resources already in place and with a view to ensuring that every maternity unit/hospital and community health service will have at least one such dedicated post in place.

Midwives and public health nurses provide routine infant feeding support to women and their babies. The role of these 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.

HSE National Standards for Infant Feeding in Maternity Services

The HSE in 2022, also finalised and published its National Standards for Infant Feeding in Maternity Services, which set out the priority areas to be addressed within maternity services to improve support for breastfeeding mothers and babies, to enable more mothers to breastfeed and to improve health outcomes for all mothers and babies regardless of method of feeding.

With a view to supporting the implementation of these Standards, the National Women and Infants Health Programme has recruited and appointed a full time dedicated national senior midwifery project manager.

This resource is developing and driving a suite of national work programmes working closely and in collaboration with maternity and community based services. Since this national appointment, the following work streams have been commenced:

- A self-assessment tool was developed by NWIHP to facilitate Maternity Services to assess their own performance against the National Standards (2022). This tool will help to identify and address opportunities and challenges implementing the standards. This tool was launched in May 2023 to the 19 Maternity Services in Ireland.
- The establishment in 2022 of the National Baby Friendly Initiative Oversight Group occurred in 2022 under the auspices of NWIHP. This group has broad representation of key stakeholders involved in infant feeding services in Ireland and includes services users. The aim of the Oversight Group is to support the ongoing work of the project co-ordinators for the HSE Baby Friendly Initiative with a particular focus on:
 - Implementation of the National Standards for Infant Feeding in Maternity Services (2022).
 - Review progress with the implementation of the Standards and self-assessment process.
 - Identify opportunities (operational, research, training, education, strategic etc.) that would further enable the HSE to support exemplar Infant Feeding Practices.
- Establishment of the Infant Feeding Specialist Support Forum also occurred in 2022 under the auspices of NWIHP. The purpose of the Infant Feeding Specialist Support Forum is to support Infant Feeding Specialists in their role as they plan, develop, begin and/or continue implementation of the National Standards for Infant Feeding in Maternity Services and provide an oversight for the NWIHP on progress being made.

Education and Support for Mothers

Educating and supporting mothers to learn and establish breastfeeding is a key objective of the HSE with multiple strands of support and work programmes in place within the HSE to support this objective, including all 19 maternity services offering and providing antenatal classes on breastfeeding, the provision of the ‘My pregnancy Book’ to all expectant parents and the extensive information available on the ‘My child website’. The latter alone provide information on multiple areas of breastfeeding 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.

In addition, the mychild.ie section of the HSE website contains almost 50 breastfeeding advice pages, which deal with issues experienced by parents as they learn this new skill with their baby.

It also 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. It is important that given the range of education and support the site offers to parents, the HSE continues to invest in the advertising of this website.

Postnatal Care

Based on the Maternity Experience Survey and listening carefully to what women told us, NWIHP is acutely aware, as are all 19 services maternity services that provision of care in the postnatal period needs to be enhanced and expanded, as this is the period in their care pathway that many women felt under supported in. Working on this and responding to the needs of women, NWIHP with the support of the Department of Health's Women's Taskforce, has developed and launched the concept of postnatal hubs.

These hubs are a local centre where women can access various elements of their postnatal maternity care and are co-located with existing community based antenatal care services. These Postnatal Community Hubs will move this essential care back to the community supported by a comprehensive and multidisciplinary package of resources and for the duration of the postpartum period. A key component of these hubs will be midwifery provided breastfeeding support.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



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