



21st July 2020

REPR/20/02459

Covid 19: Reopening of HSE drug counselling services

Ann Corr
Dept. of Health
Lower. Baggott Street
Dublin 2

Dear Ann,

I refer to the above representations from Senator Lynn Ruane regarding reopening of HSE drug counselling services and the following outlines the position:

Having sought clarity from the Department in relation to Senator Ruane's query, the Department advised that a specific concern was raised by her around counselling in the South West area of Dublin. I have included reference to this area in my response.

When the health response to the Covid 19 Global Pandemic began there was a concerted effort by the HSE to provide safe and effective care to the anticipated surge of individuals who contracted the virus. In addition there was a clear responsibility on the HSE to ensure that people who were attending services were kept safe and every effort was made to minimise exposure to the virus. A significant number of staff with clinical training and expertise were required to redeploy to the front line to work in Assessment hubs and acute services. A number of the buildings in existing health services, including Addiction services, were not able to comply with Social Distancing guidelines and did require review and reconfiguration. This resulted in the curtailment of some existing services for a period of time during the pandemic.

Where possible, services continued to deliver inputs to individuals and adapted to new ways of working including the introduction of remote counselling/assessment. To support this approach, the HSE Addiction services developed a number of contingency plans and guidance documents for staff working with People Who Used Drugs. These documents were endorsed by the National Addiction Governance Group and circulated widely to services. Specifically there were documents on induction and continuation of OST <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/other-areas/health-inequalities/contingency-planning-for-people-who-use-drugs.pdf> and a document on remote consultation <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/other-areas/health-inequalities/remote-consultations.pdf>



Counselling was continued where possible using remote support and many areas were able to provide this service where staff were available. An excellent working relationship between the HSE Addiction services and local Drug and Alcohol Task Force funded services allowed for significant supports to be provided to people in Recovery across the country. In addition, a resource for people in Recovery was posted on the drugs.ie website http://www.drugs.ie/resources/covid/drug_recovery/ and an up to date directory of available services was maintained on the drugs.ie site. The HSE Drug and Alcohol helpline remained open throughout the crisis.

In relation to the South West area of Dublin which falls under CHO 7, the HSE Addiction service have informed me that counselling services did not cease but continued to be provided via telephone consultation where required. The return to one to one, face to face counselling is slowly returning however a number of the service users are reluctant to engage due to anxieties around Covid 19. The virtual health platform 'Attend Anywhere' is also being provided as an option.

As we move out of the acute phase of the Pandemic, services are now reopening in a planned and appropriate manner. The aim is to optimise service user care while minimising the risks to the healthcare staff, the wider healthcare service and the public. The planning and implementation of resumption is informed by relevant guidance and resources available on the HPSC website and through a number of webinars that have been provided to staff.

The provision of support for individuals using remote consultation method will become more normal in the future once a safe and secure online platform ('Attend Anywhere' identified as such) has been rolled out nationally. Where possible face to face interventions have been reintroduced already.

I trust this information is of assistance but should you have any further queries please contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Eamon Keenan
National Clinical Lead – Addiction Services.