The emergence of Covid-19 worldwide and in Ireland has had a significant impact on the ongoing delivery of health and social care. The significant increase in cases currently being seen, with 10,481 cases reported in the 14 days from 14 December up to midnight on 27 December, is of serious concern. It is expected that the increased level of socialisation over the Christmas period will result in an even greater number of cases being reported in the coming days, with associated impacts on all settings of our health system. The case numbers today (29th December) are sadly a new record at 1,546 with a likelihood of higher numbers later in the week and a positivity rate of approximately 10%.

As set out in the joint DOH-HSE paper which was submitted to NPHET on 25 November, the level of Covid-19 in the community will inevitably be a key determinant of the level of care that can be delivered across all settings, and of the associated risk to patients, service users and healthcare workers. Consistent with the learning arising from the pandemic to date, the ECDC has further highlighted that the probability of COVID-19 introduction into an LTRC depends on the level of COVID-19 circulation in the community. The positivity rate from serial testing in Nursing Homes is currently 0.7%, an increase from 0.3% in recent weeks and likely increasing further as serial testing paused from 23rd to 28th recommences on 29th.

Notwithstanding the investment and improvements in IPC, it is evident that acute hospitals continue to represent a specific risk with respect to the transmission of infection, and serious concerns remain regarding the prevalence of COVID-19 in our acute hospitals which is closely related to the incidence of infection in the wider community. The acute hospital system is still seeing slightly fewer patients than at the same time last year, with the week ending 22 December seeing a 38% decrease in daily average trolley numbers and a 36% decrease in delayed transfers of care when compared to the same week last year. As of 8pm on 28 December, there were 983 vacant beds in the acute hospital system.

However, these beds are not distributed evenly across the system, and the impact of the Christmas bank holidays on the number of patients presenting to hospitals and on patient flow will be seen over the coming days. Acute hospitals are under significant pressure arising from the influx of Covid-19 patients, and the relatively high number of vacant beds should not be regarded as a sign that the system is under control. The situation across all settings is now deteriorating, as expected following the significant number of cases reported in the last 14 days:

- As of 2pm on 29 December, there were 411 patients with Covid-19 in hospital. Of those, 47 had been diagnosed within the last 24 hours, with a further 164 patients awaiting test results. This compares to 235 patients in hospital on 22 December.
• As of 2pm on 29 December, there are 34 Covid patients in intensive care. This compares to 28 patients on the same day last week.

• Data provided by the HPSC indicates that, in the week from 21-28 December, there were 10 new outbreaks in public acute hospitals. Up to midnight on 28 December, there are 51 open outbreaks in public acute hospitals, comprising 925 cases, including 432 cases in healthcare workers. A total of 69 deaths have been associated with those open outbreaks.

• As at 28 December, there are 47 nursing homes with open outbreaks, representing 8% of the 570 nursing homes. There have been 13 new nursing home outbreaks in the last seven days in Cork, Mayo, Dublin, Galway, Wicklow, Kildare, Wexford and Kerry. This is an increasing rate of outbreak, where previous weeks averaged 8 to 10 outbreaks over a seven day period.

• As of 28 December, there are 15 open outbreaks in disability residential centres with one new outbreak in the last 7 days (preliminary data).

• The Serial Testing Programme for staff in nursing homes is ongoing. To date, the programme has completed 395,578 tests and identified 1,378 detected cases. This is a detected rate of 0.35%. Cycle 6 of serial testing of Residential Care Facilities commenced on 9th December 2020 for a four-week period. As of 28 December 2020, 44,383 tests have been completed, with 311 detected cases (detection rate: 0.70%).

Where outbreaks occur in healthcare settings, these services are impacted by the loss of staff due to illness or Covid related leave; other services are impacted due to the need to redeploy staff, and any necessary redeployment of staff to respond to urgent Covid needs impacts on the level of non-Covid care that can be delivered. It is not yet clear what the impact of the vaccination programme will be on staffing levels in the acute and community settings, but it is expected that there will be fewer nursing staff available as a consequence of a widespread vaccination campaign.

The impact of the significant rise in Covid cases reported over the last 14 days is only now beginning to be seen on the health system. It should be noted that generally, elective work that is carried out in January is of a time-critical nature and is not easily postponed. All Hospital Groups will manage elective work having regard to the level of Covid in circulation. It is expected that acute hospitals will come under increased pressure in the coming days, with equivalent impact on community services, potentially displacing non-Covid care and potentially leading to an overwhelmed system in which quality care is compromised and outcomes are poorer.

ENDS