

# **National Public Health Emergency Team**

## **Joint Department of Health and HSE Update**

### **Update on Control of Transmission of COVID-19 in Acute Hospitals**

**23 December 2020**

Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

## Summary

In light of ongoing concerns regarding the transmission of COVID-19 in the acute hospital sector, and further to the discussion at the NPHEM meeting on 17 December last, this paper provides an update on specific measures that are being implemented by the HSE to reduce the risk of nosocomial infection and to manage and control hospital outbreaks, including the establishment of the *National Working Group for control of transmission of COVID-19 in the acute hospital setting*; engagement with acute hospitals regarding efforts to control the spread of COVID-19; mass testing in the context of significant hospital outbreaks; and the proposed trial programme of serial testing of healthcare workers which will be rolled out in early January.

## Background

Both the Department and the HSE remain seriously concerned in relation to ongoing COVID-19 transmission in the acute hospital sector and the adverse impact on patients and staff. A joint paper was submitted to NPHEM last week, which provided a high-level overview of the steps that have been taken to date, to help reduce the risk of nosocomial infection, including the provision of significant additional funding for infection prevention and control in 2020 and 2021. That paper also outlined the current situation with regard to the extent of COVID-19 outbreaks in our acute hospitals and sets out the range of enhanced measures which have been, and will continue to be, implemented, both nationally and across the acute hospital system, to address this issue.

The Department and the HSE are fully committed to ensuring that these enhanced measures are implemented as a priority and have the anticipated impact to manage and control the transmission of COVID-19 in our acute hospitals. This paper provides a brief update on the implementation of those enhanced measures.

## National Outbreak Control Oversight Team

As noted in the paper *Control of Transmission of COVID-19 in Acute Hospitals* from 17 December last, and as recommended by NPHEM, the HSE has now established the *National Working Group for control of transmission of COVID-19 in the acute hospital setting*. The Group met for the first time on 21 December and the following Terms of Reference were agreed:

- Governance  
The *National Working Group for control of transmission of COVID-19 in the acute hospital setting* is constituted as a working group of the AMRIC Oversight Group.
- Role and Purpose  
The Working Group will coordinate the response to COVID-19 across all acute hospitals addressing hospital acquired COVID-19 in hospital patients, COVID-19 in acute hospital staff and the prevention, detection and control of outbreaks.
- The group will produce weekly updates that will include inter alia:
  - Incidence of hospital acquired COVID-19 in hospital patients (by hospital).
  - Incidence of COVID-19 in acute hospital staff (by hospital).
  - Number of active COVID-19 outbreaks in the acute hospital system (by hospital).
  - Impact of outbreaks on patients, staff and operation of services.
  - Learning from experience in individual hospitals with wider application.

In order to ensure that the actions agreed by the Group are implemented within the established HSE accountability framework for acute hospitals, the Group is chaired by the National Director Acute Operations (or nominee). The Working Group includes:

- Two hospital groups CEOs
- National Clinical Director for Health Protection (or nominee)
- National Lead Occupational Health
- NCAGL Acute Hospitals
- HSE AMRIC Clinical Lead, Programme Manager and Director of Nursing
- Acute Operational AMRIC GM
- Representative of the National Ambulance Service
- Lead Integrated Care
- National Lead for Testing and Tracing
- National Director, Emergency Management
- Nominee OCIO
- Interim Director HPSC
- Nominee Public Health

#### **Focus on control of spread in Acute Hospitals**

Stemming from the HSE paper *Enhanced measures for the control of spread of COVID-19 in Acute Hospitals*, which NPHET endorsed on 3 December last, the HSE developed and circulated a questionnaire/checklist for all acute hospitals to gather real time information in relation to the implementation of specific measures to prevent the introduction of the virus into the hospital, and to reduce the risk of transmission where it is introduced. This questionnaire included specific sections in relation to control measures relating to patients, i.e. testing pre-admission; screening and streaming patients; testing after admission; and cohorting of COVID-19 patients, and sections relating to staff i.e. regarding implementation of general infection, prevention and control guidance and procedures, as well as the implementation of the recently agreed national criteria for testing of asymptomatic staff in response to defined signals.

In a follow up to the questionnaire, the HSE is now actively engaging with individual hospitals in order to ensure that where any potential issues have been identified, that these are addressed urgently, and as appropriate.

#### **Mass Testing in the context of Hospital Outbreaks**

The paper, *Enhanced measures for the control of spread of COVID-19 in Acute Hospitals*, set out national criteria for testing asymptomatic staff in response to certain signals, including the testing of all staff where a significant outbreak occurs in a hospital. To date, mass testing has been undertaken in response to significant hospital outbreaks, including in Letterkenny University Hospital, University Hospital Limerick, St Colmcille's, Loughlinstown, and Naas General Hospital.

Beaumont Hospital is experiencing an outbreak at present and is engaging in extensive testing of both staff and patients, utilising its own laboratory resources. The hospital is also undertaking repeat testing of both patients and staff and continuing to identify positive cases. The hospital maintains a

strong focus on controlling transmission and compliance with the Infection, prevention and control guidelines.

Where necessary, in the context of a significant outbreak, the National Ambulance Service is available to be deployed to support and augment the on-site testing capacity of individual hospitals to ensure that the testing of staff is expedited. However, it is noted that while additional testing capacity is currently available across the system, we need to remain alert to the further demands and challenges that are likely to be placed on testing capacity nationally in the coming weeks, as a result of the increasing prevalence of the virus in the community.

### **Serial Testing of Healthcare Workers**

Papers presented to NPHET, on 3 and 17 December, outlined plans for a serial testing programme for healthcare workers which will be trialled from 4 January next. The HSE is currently planning the rollout of this programme which will be undertaken with the assistance of the National Ambulance Service with bookings scheduled through the Swiftqueue platform. The trial serial testing programme will be undertaken at St James's Hospital, Naas General Hospital, and St Colmcille's Hospital and learnings will inform the approach to serial testing going forward.

### **Conclusion**

The rate of transmission of the virus within our acute hospitals is a grave concern. As of today, there are 52 open outbreaks in public acute hospitals with 9 new outbreaks identified in the past week. In addition, very significant increases in case numbers have been experienced at a national level in recent days and it is anticipated that this upward trajectory will continue in the immediate term.

Experience with the pandemic to-date indicates that the worsening epidemiological situation in the community will be followed by a significant increase in hospitalisations. The intergenerational socialisation during the Christmas period is also likely to lead to an increase in the numbers of older people becoming infected. This anticipated increased in hospitalisations, and the older age profile of patients, will undoubtedly put increased pressures on the acute hospital system, in circumstances where the hospitals are already challenged because of the number of open outbreaks.

The current serious epidemiological situation brings into sharper focus the need for continued, sustained and increased efforts to limit the introduction and control the spread of the virus within our acute hospitals. In that regard, the *National Working Group for control of transmission of COVID-19 in the acute hospital setting* will be crucial to provide appropriate oversight and to ensure a co-ordinated and consistent approach across the acute hospital sector. The Department and the HSE will continue to engage to ensure that the enhanced measures are implemented as a matter of urgency, and to ensure that any further additional measures necessary to address the current situation, are introduced as required and as a priority.

**22 December 2020**