

7.1 Deputy L.V. Feltham to the Minister for Infrastructure regarding the presence of R.A.A.C. in areas of the hospital

Will the Minister update the Assembly and tell Members what areas of the hospital it is known that R.A.A.C. (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) may be present; when this information was identified whether these areas are still being occupied by staff and or accessed by the public; and what is the Minister doing to ensure patient and staff safety?

Deputy T. Binet (The Minister for Infrastructure):

This issue first came to my attention at the end of last week. I was informed that a detailed review of the existing hospital plans had revealed the possible presence of R.A.A.C., particularly in the area referred to as Block F. To be more precise, the plans identified a product suspected to be R.A.A.C. in the staff laboratory, in the Pathology Department. While less clear, they indicated the possible presence of R.A.A.C. of Block F, including a disused kitchen, which now serves as a storage and plant room. The presence of R.A.A.C. has yet to be confirmed and all areas of the hospital continue to be used as they would normally. As might be expected, work has been underway over the past few days to plan various measures that would or will be implemented in the event that R.A.A.C. is formally identified. I should also mention that formal testing is due to commence this afternoon and will be undertaken by qualified structural engineers. Investigations continue and there is the possibility that further instances may come to light. With regard to the question about public safety, this is something that most people probably do not know, but the hospital maintenance does not sit with Infrastructure. It sits directly under H.C.S. (Health and Community Services). There is a hospital maintenance team that reports to H.C.S., so unfortunately I am not in a position to comment on what measures will or will not be taken. I have answered the questions as best I can, given that Infrastructure does work with that team, but it is not out team's principal responsibility.

7.1.1 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Given that the Minister has stated that it is not his team's principal responsibility, what conversations has he had with the Minister for Health and Social Services to ensure that this is taken on board as a very urgent matter and something that staff and patients may be very concerned about?

Deputy T. Binet:

I am sure people are very concerned, as indeed was I. I had no discussions with the Minister for Health and Social Services on this subject because, as I say, the responsibility does not sit with me.

7.1.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

From the answers he has given about where responsibility lies for this building, what assurances can he give the Assembly based on conversations he has had with his own officers about whether or not the hospital building is currently safe for the people who are in it. If he cannot give a clear answer on that, will he endeavour to have that conversation as a matter of urgency with those who are responsible for it?

Deputy T. Binet:

I have been in touch with the department every day since Friday on this matter for further particulars. My phone calls and email traffic can be checked. As I say, I have reported that

which I can report up to this point in time. Myself and my team remain in touch with the hospital maintenance team.

7.1.3 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

There was a part of that question asking if to the best of the Minister's knowledge, based on the extensive discussions he has outlined he has had in the last few days, whether or not he can confirm if that building is safe for those who are in it?

Deputy T. Binet:

It would be very difficult in my position to offer a full opinion, but it is safe to assume that if the people that look after the hospital maintenance consider it to be sufficiently safe to leave open to the public then my guess is that it would be. The material would have to be 30 years old or more and there has not been any movement or any sign of problems. That does not provide any guarantee for anybody, but one has to be sensible in these instances and ask the question: given that fact, would you want to disrupt the operation of the hospital at this point in time for the matter of 3 or 4 days, particularly as it included a weekend where there is not a great deal of activity in the hospital, in light of all of the circumstances? The judgment appears to have been taken that the hospital is to stay open.

7.1.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Surely if there is a lack of communication or a lack of responsibility that is not shared in terms of safety of people and staff then the Minister should have been in touch extensively with the Minister for Health and Social Services in order to sort things out and make sure that safety was secured.

Deputy T. Binet:

That was quite an extraordinary statement: a lack of responsibility and a lack of communication. The lack of responsibility, perhaps the Deputy would like to point that in the direction of the people who are looking after the job, which, as I say, that does not sit with me. Lack of communication, I am very happy to share with the Deputy after the sitting this afternoon the communications that I have had during the course of the 4 days that this has been revealed.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

No, Sir. It seems to me, and it must seem to others, that what this is is denial of responsibility and pointing the finger at somebody else.

Deputy T. Binet:

Sir, I have to say I consider that comment to be nonsensical. It is not relevant, Sir.

7.1.5 Deputy C.D. Curtis of St. Helier Central:

Under Jersey's Health and Safety at Work Law, it is the duty of every employer to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees. While investigations are underway, does the Minister consider it necessary under health and safety regulations to close the possibly dangerous parts of the building, as it may be liable to collapse as stated in U.K. regulations, to protect staff?

Deputy T. Binet:

At the risk of repeating myself for the fourth time, it is not a decision that rests with me and, as such, I am not able to take that decision.

7.1.6 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Will the Minister, as he has said a lot it is not his responsibility, give the Assembly and the general public his assurance that he will work collaboratively with the Minister for Health and Social Services to ensure that she and her team have the necessary resources and expertise from his team to ensure that this matter is sorted out as soon as possible and that health and safety of staff and patients is kept paramount?

[12:15]

Deputy T. Binet:

There seems to be an insistence that I do all of this via the Minister for Health and Social Services. I do not see that there is a particular need, given that I am in constant touch with my own team and that that team is in touch with the team that is doing the job. We are working collaboratively. I do not know what conversation I would have with the Minister for Health and Social Services in this regard.