

20.09.22

10 Deputy M.R. Higgins of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding preparations for a winter spike in coronavirus cases (OQ.245/2020):

Will the Minister update States Members on his department's principal preparation for a potential spike in the coronavirus cases in the next few months and throughout the winter?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

I am pleased to answer this question and reassure the Deputy that Health and Community Services has been undertaking extensive winter planning and COVID preparedness. We have clinical and operational groups from across the department meeting on a weekly basis to ensure that business continuity plans are updated; and that is across the hospital, the community, mental health and social care services. In addition, we continually engage with partners such as G.P.s, such as charities and other third sector organisations around the delivery of care, in particular infection prevention control, the continued supply of P.P.E. (personal protection equipment) and the development of pathways of care to ensure citizens are looked after.

[11:00]

4.10.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can the Minister assure Members that they have sufficient P.P.E. for all - hospital staff, care home workers, emergency services, et cetera - and that they have sufficient testing agents and material for testing Islanders and for us to deal with the severe side effects that patients experience with COVID-19 in its extreme form?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

We have good supplies of P.P.E. and the testing swabs. We have a policy to hold at least 3 months' supply of P.P.E. in reserve and we are in a good place with all those stocks.

4.10.2 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

Part of the principal preparations for the winter is the hospital and so can the Minister outline any updates on the plans in case of any sort of either flu, norovirus or of course the COVID-19; what preparations are in place to ensure the hospital can deal with that?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The large part of our preparations is around vaccination programmes. We are encouraging as many people as are eligible to take up the flu vaccine and we are rolling that out to people aged 50-plus rather than the usual 65-plus. I do hope that many members of the public will take that up because it provides additional protection and reduces any pressure that might occur on hospital services if we were to have a bad flu season. Then of course we are preparing for the COVID vaccine, which we hope will come as soon as it can, but first of all we will be dealing with the flu vaccine. The hospital is in a good state of preparedness; we have learnt a very great deal from the lockdown and the need to be ready to deliver care. At the same time we are catching up with the backlog that occurred at that time and making good progress through the lists.

4.10.3 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

The crux of my question was the hospital; can he confirm the situation of staffing levels in terms of will people be allowed annual leave and holiday? Can he update us in those preparations specifically, including ensuring those staff members get any sort of vaccination?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Specifically on vaccination, staff will be among the first cohort and they are prioritised for vaccination. Annual leave has not been cancelled, yes, of course all staff are entitled to annual leave. They are working to normal terms and conditions but we do recognise that staff have been put under a great deal of pressure and we have a completely dedicated but somewhat exhausted staff in some respects, and we are mindful of that. There have also been extensive preparations and measures put in place to address their mental health and well-being. Those are continuing and I am very proud and pleased of the programme that has been put in place and has been taken up by very many members of staff who recognise the importance not just of trying to maintain their physical fitness but the wider well-being needs as well. I hope that answers the Deputy's question.

4.10.4 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Following on from the initial question: when will the Minister share the department's plans for dealing with a potential spike of coronavirus with the Assembly?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

These are very much operational plans. I will undertake to circulate if not the very granular detail but a good summary of exactly how this is planned, but there are numerous business continuity plans across all sectors of hospital and social care services, so there is good preparation and a lot of planning that has gone into this.

Deputy J.H. Perchard:

My question was when will the Minister share these plans?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I will ask officers to prepare a document which ... I do not want to just send out dozens of business continuity plans for each care group within the service. That would be almost impenetrable. So I will ask officers to prepare a good resumé and then if Members wish to delve into the detail we can provide that.

4.10.5 Deputy G.J. Truscott of St. Brelade:

With the flu season nearly upon us and with COVID-19 on the rise in countries to the north and the east of us, will the Minister finally consider making the wearing of facemask covering in confined public spaces mandatory rather than voluntary as is the case now; and if not, why not?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I think that is coming. That is in our legislative programme to introduce a law that would provide for mask wearing in indoor public places, and that will come before the Assembly to make that decision. Meanwhile it remains strongly recommended and we are to engage in discussions with retailers particularly about how they might encourage the wearing of masks in retail outlets because I believe we are very relaxed in Jersey. Anyone who has been to the U.K. or other countries this summer will have seen how much more the wearing of masks is prevalent there, and there is a much greater sense of what we face whereas perhaps in Jersey we have become too relaxed about this and we do not realise that COVID is still with us and poses a threat. So this will receive a greater profile.

4.10.6 Deputy G.J. Truscott:

One cannot help feeling there is a battle with the flu bug and COVID-19 looming. Personally I feel we should be using every tool in our locker to combat this public threat. Would the Minister indicate how soon he could implement the necessary changes to legislation to make the wearing of face coverings compulsory in a prescribed situation in a public place?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

To make it compulsory I am advised that we need to introduce legislation. That has been drafted, I have had talks around it, but it will need to be lodged I hope at the beginning of October, and then of course we would need a 6-week lodging period unless it is the case that the Assembly wish to take the debate within a shorter time. I will speak to the Deputy, I will test out Members before perhaps to see if that might be something that the Assembly would wish to do.

4.10.7 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I would like to thank the Minister for his answers and for agreeing to supply us with further details. From what he just said, can we be assured that unlike when the pandemic first broke out in March that we should experience no similar problems going forward?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

We are in a good place, we are better prepared. It would be foolhardy to give my personal assurance that we will not encounter any bumps along the way because this is an unpredictable situation, but we are in an excellent state of preparedness through the hard work of many teams in the public service and I do not think we have omitted anything that we needed to have done to be prepared.