

21.07.19

1 Deputy I. Gardiner of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the extra workload and stress due to increase in Covid-19 cases: (OQ.166/2021)

Will the Minister advise Members what impact the recent sharp increase in COVID-19 cases has had on workload stress experienced by staff within the Island's health service?

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

The Health and Community Services well-being service has been regularly monitoring the well-being of staff throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this time we have seen an increase in the numbers of H.C.S. (Health and Community Services) staff who have taken absence from work. Some of these absences relate to emotional difficulties that are work-related while many relate to factors outside of work. Our staff have been telling us through a number of forums that working through COVID has been difficult for them, understandably. Many of the stories we have heard show the most significant impact on their well-being, as related to H.C.S. staff, not being able to use their normal supportive networks during COVID. We are particularly aware of H.C.S. staff struggling because of their family not living in the Island. They have not been able to visit them for long periods of time while perhaps knowing they are unwell or even that they have lost a family member and have not been able to say goodbye personally or attend their funeral. Clearly all of these events have an impact and have had that impact on our staff.

4.1.1 Deputy I. Gardiner:

Would the Minister advise how many of our health staff in numbers and percentage have tested positive, isolating or signed off sick at the moment? What extra resources have been allocated to mitigate the stress, the rapid rise of cases it is causing?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Currently, as of today, we have 16 positive cases among staff in H.C.S. Eleven are isolating as direct contacts. We have 38 in total listed as absence due to COVID-related because the balance isolating or absent for other reasons in the main because they are supporting family members who may be positive or who may be having to isolate. In terms of supporting them, in these difficult times, we provide regular well-being checks and follow up all those staff with our wellness team. We offer one-to-one counselling sessions and we have team reflective sessions with the specific focus on building resilience.

4.1.2 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Could I ask the Minister whether, at the time the decision was made to allow COVID back into our community, when the restrictions at the borders were loosened, did the Minister seek out any sort of advice or projections on what the potential impact of more COVID cases in Jersey would have on health staff and what his department's ability would be to manage this?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

So many of these factors were taken into account. The pressures on hospital service were a very significant factor in our considerations, and continue to be.

4.1.3 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Could the Minister indicate what record there will be of advice or projections that were provided at the time and what it said? What it told the decisions-makers were likely to be the consequences of this decision and what the health service would therefore have to endure?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I cannot recall what specific advice or the detail that was given at the time because it is some removed since the time the borders were opened or restrictions relaxed, rather. But there are the usual S.T.A.C. (Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell) minutes. There would be the Public Advice health, which in turn would be informed by advice from H.C.S.

4.1.4 Senator K.L. Moore:

Does the Minister also recognise or identify that the wider culture in Health and Community Services also takes an additional impact on staff at this particularly difficult time already? If I could quote from a hearing that has been recently conducted by the Corporate Services Scrutiny Panel, which encapsulates the point. It reads: "The culture in Health is currently terrible. I have worked here for 25 years and never heard so many cases of poor treatment of staff. Morale is rock bottom."

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not accept that morale is at rock bottom. This is an extremely difficult time for the staff, for the reasons I outlined in my answer to Deputy Gardiner. But I want to uphold the staff in H.C.S. who have been doing a wonderful, excellent job in looking after Islanders, whether COVID-related illness or not. The hospital has kept operating and we have an excellent staff who are responding. We are all on a journey through a period of change, through a period of transition, and of course those transitions are sometimes difficult. People come along at different speeds but there is good, joint working. Our hospital service is clinically-led and all clinicians, all staff working in them, are able to input with their concerns into their respective peer groups. I think we should be conscious that we should not take simply the comments made by one person in isolation but try and have a more rounded view of over 2,400 people working in H.C.S.

4.1.5 Senator K.L. Moore:

I would remind the Minister of my comment in the question, which identified that it was a common theme, and he will be able to read more when we publish our report. The question is: what does the Minister propose to do to ensure that the well-being of staff is improved and better supported?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I have spoken, in answer to the question, about our wellness team. We have counselling sessions but we are also working across the organisation to develop our response to the Government-wide Be Heard survey and to understand what our staff are saying to us and to make improvements in the service we offer and the care we give, not only to patients but also to our staff.

4.1.6 Connétable S.A. Le Sueur-Rennard of St. Saviour:

Could you tell me if the homeless and those sleeping rough have been given the vaccination please?

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

I am sorry, that question is not within the original question, I am afraid, which is about the impact on staff within the health service caused by COVID. You could ask that under questions without notice, Constable.

4.1.7 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier:

Given that a sharp increase in COVID cases may mean an increase in long COVID cases, would he agree that that might be one of the issues that is causing stress among staff? Could he outline specifically what he is trying to do to support members of his staff who have long COVID?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I would agree, like everybody in the Island, we would all have concerns around the possibility of long COVID and what its affects may be, which have yet to be fully understood. There is support within H.C.S. for those who may be suffering currently or who may be concerned about the effects of long COVID. Certainly we are anxious to develop an understanding both locally with primary care, where long COVID is likely to manifest itself, but also nationally. I know Dr. Muscat is working closely, keeping in close contact with those studying long COVID both nationally and internationally.

4.1.8 Deputy R.J. Ward:

For those who are currently suffering long COVID in his staff, his workforce, are there options to go to their G.P.s (general practitioners) for support and pay each time they do or is there something specific in place in his workforce care plan to look after those members of his staff?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, there is specific help. The help I have spoken of that can be accessed by each and every member of H.C.S. staff, and they know the pathways that they can use to seek that help.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

Senator Ferguson, you are a little late to the pass here but there is room for a short question if you want to come in. We cannot hear you, Senator. If the Senator is having some connection problem she could perhaps raise her question during questions without notice and I will call Deputy Gardiner for her final supplementary.

4.1.9 Deputy I. Gardiner:

At the beginning of June concerns were expressed with the Minister regarding capacity of test and trace. Weeks later we needed to change rules as test and trace did not cope with increased numbers. Now we are raising concerns regarding the staff at the hospital. How can the Minister reassure Islanders that we will not face a similar situation at the hospital?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not think it is appropriate to compare hospital staff support with a very operational type, a new procedure, that is the test and trace system. Obviously we have been through the second wave in the winter in which our services or support to staff were tested at a very severe time. That stood up and that help was available to staff, and I fully anticipate that it will remain in place. It is going to be there and that will be available for all staff to access and they know the pathways to it. It is being used, I am pleased to say.