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Deputy Burke,  
Dáil Éireann,  
Leinster House  
Dublin 2

**PQ 14239/24: To ask the Minister for Health if he will develop an up-to-date infant feeding policy for those with HIV in Ireland, in line with recent British HIV Association guidance, that would facilitate shared decision-making between healthcare professionals and service users; and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

Dear Deputy Burke,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Question, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response. I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position.

Since 1999 a voluntary programme of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) antenatal screening has been in place offering HIV testing for women in Ireland. In 2001, a system to monitor and evaluate the antenatal testing programme was put in place by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC). Since then, data has been collected from maternity hospitals/units annually and are evaluated by HPSC.

In 2021, data from all 19 maternity hospitals/ units showed that 62 women tested positive for HIV at antenatal screening (0.11%). Of the 62 women who tested positive for HIV, just 5 were newly diagnosed.

In terms of the needs of these women vis-à-vis their infant feeding requirement, a Guide was produced by infectious disease specialists in Ireland in 2015. This Rainbow Clinic Guide titled “Preventing perinatal transmission: a practical guide to the antenatal and perinatal management of HIV, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, Herpes Simplex, and Syphilis” is aimed at clinical professionals directly involved in the care of pregnant women and their infants.

Within this guide, it is stated that “there remains a level of transmission risk that cannot be precisely quantified even for fully virally suppressed woman, thus where safe formula feeds are available breast feeding is strongly discouraged for this group. In Ireland, all HIV infected women are advised to exclusively bottle feed their infants with formula milk. The HPSC also notes that an HIV-positive mother can pass her HIV to her unborn child through nursing, labour, and delivery, or both (HPSC, 2019).

Thinking in this area has evolved over time, with the WHO noting that anti-retroviral therapy reduces the risk of post-natal HIV transmission through exclusive breastfeeding. This potentially supports infants to benefit from breastfeeding and as such the WHO recommends that health services should endeavour to offer the necessary medication to allow mothers to do breastfeeding if that is their desire.

As such balancing risks and needs, maternity services are also guided by updated Breastfeeding information leaflets published by BHIVA which both state that formula feeding is the safest option for babies whilst noting that breastfeeding can be supported in the context of optimised HIV management following counselling and a shared decision making process.

Therefore close collaboration is required between infectious disease teams, maternity teams and the pregnant woman, with the woman's health and management of her HIV being a key consideration.

Under the auspices of the HSE's National Women and Infants Health Programme, a national up to date Infant Feeding Guideline is under development. Work in this area has only just commenced, and will be overseen by a dedicated guideline development group that includes a small teams of clinicians and health professionals with expertise in this area.

Whilst this work is currently being defined and scoped out by the development team, it is anticipated by NWIHP that as part of the process, the group will review in a comprehensive manner all relevant national and international guidance and best practice in this area with a view to addressing and supporting the needs of all women who present to our maternity services. The HSE are hopeful for a launch date of this new national guideline in 2025.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



**Mary-Jo Biggs, General Manager, National Women and Infants Health Programme**