

Joint Committee on Health
22 January 2021
Opening Statement by the Dr. Ronan Glynn,
Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health

Chairman, Committee Members

I would like to thank you for the invitation to address the Committee today. I am joined today by Ms. Celeste O' Callaghan, Mr Gerry O' Brien and Mr David Smith from the Department of Health, along with colleagues from the HSE.

It is almost 12 months since the establishment of the National Public Health Emergency Team and the beginning of our response to COVID-19.

To date, approximately 182,000 cases of coronavirus have been confirmed. Sadly, over 2,800 deaths from COVID-19 have been reported. I want to extend my heartfelt sympathies to the families and friends that have lost loved ones to this disease.

Ireland is now experiencing a severe third wave of infection, as are many other jurisdictions. The country has experienced a dramatic increase in disease incidence, hospitalisations, and mortality since

late December, with 532 deaths notified with a date of death in January so far.

While there are some positive signs in recent days that transmission levels are reducing, incidence rates remain very high – at levels 10-15 times greater than those observed in early December. The situation therefore remains extremely worrying with older and vulnerable individuals at greatest risk.

Numbers of cases in hospital are tracking close to optimistic model predictions but it is important to remain cognisant that, even assuming a continued reduction in case numbers, there will still be a very slow decrease in numbers in hospital. Similarly, the total number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care units is at a very elevated level and it must be noted that a significant number of patients are also receiving advanced respiratory support on general wards.

As well as the concern regarding the health and wellbeing of those hospitalised, there is a clear risk for the capacity and operation of the healthcare system more broadly. A clear priority for NPHEt throughout this pandemic has been the protection of non-COVID

health and social care services and, unfortunately, this has been very significantly impacted by the recent deterioration.

It remains imperative that all members of society collectively adhere to the public health advice, as well as the restrictive measures that have been put in place by Government.

It is important to reflect that that the basic objective we are trying to achieve is to interrupt the transmission of this virus from person to person. It is clear that the vast majority of the public are playing their part to try to reduce transmission, and this is perhaps best emphasised by the fact that the average number of close contacts per case has decreased from almost 5 at the end of December to just 2.1 today. But these efforts are more important than ever at this time and it is vital that they are maintained over the coming weeks.

I am pleased to say that our COVID vaccination programme is now well underway. By Wednesday evening last almost 122,000 vaccines were administered, with 73,100 for frontline healthcare workers and 48,800 to long term care facilities, where both patients and staff were vaccinated.

This is the largest ever vaccination programme conducted by the State. Vaccinations will be offered free to all residents of Ireland who

are indicated and wish to receive it, and we hope to see full public uptake. On a particularly positive note, the proportion of people who say that they will definitely or probably take the vaccine when it is offered to them has risen from 76% to 85% over recent weeks.

However, while the vaccine programme is being rolled out, we must continue to rely on the tools that are immediately available to us. The use of face coverings, social distancing, hand and respiratory etiquette, working from home where at all possible and, ultimately, staying at home unless it is essential to be out remain vital to suppress the virus.

We are also continuing to monitor the prevalence of new variants of the virus as they emerge. Viruses change constantly through mutation. While most of these will not have a significant impact, some mutations may provide the virus with a selective advantage, such as increased transmissibility or the ability to evade the immune response. We are monitoring three variants in particular at this time; one each of which were first identified in the UK, South Africa and Brazil.

I should reiterate that the Government continues to advise against all non-essential travel at this time, a recommendation which the ECDC yesterday identified as being key to slowing down the importation and spread of new variants.

To conclude, I want to acknowledge that there is hardly any aspect of Irish life that has not been impacted in some way by this pandemic, and I would like to thank the public for their continued efforts. However, much more progress must be achieved and sustained over the coming weeks to bring this disease under control and to substantially reduce the ongoing profound impact on all key public health priorities. At this stage, we need everyone to stay at home, other than for essential reasons, so that we can continue to suppress the virus and minimise any further impact on public health.

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