

Covid-19 testing must be ramped up across mental health facilities

Mental Health Commission data shows inconsistencies in staff testing

Monday, April 27th: The Mental Health Commission has today said that it intends to closely monitor testing of mental health staff by service providers, having noted significant inconsistencies in the application of new guidance in relation to testing in some long-term residential facilities.

As part of its risk-rating of in-patient mental health services, along with 24-hour community residences, the Commission noted that just two out of the nine Community Healthcare Organisations (CHOs) have completed, or mostly completed, testing on mental health staff.

“While our primary focus must always be on the safety and wellbeing of patients and residents of the units that we are monitoring, it is a concern that not all staff have been tested for Covid-19 and we will continue to monitor and flag this issue with the HSE,” said the Chief Executive of the Mental Health Commission, John Farrelly.

The Commission also confirmed that, as of last Friday, April 24th, 12 people have now died in total from Covid-19 across all 176 in-patient units and community residences, with one additional death reported last week. A total of 58 services have reported suspected or confirmed cases. There were 94 suspected or confirmed cases relating to residents (54 of which have been confirmed) and 201 suspected or confirmed cases relating to staff (80 of which have been confirmed).

A report of the data gathered by the Commission is issued to the HSE, Department of Health and NPHET at the end of each working week.

Meanwhile, the Commission expedited the registration of a further two approved in-patient centres last week. The transfer of a number of residents from the Central Mental Hospital into a nine-bedded unit in the newly-built National Forensic Mental Health Services in Portrane will allow some facilities in the former centre to be reconfigured as part of its Covid-19 response. The opening of another unit on the campus of St Davnet’s Hospital in Monaghan was also brought forward in response to the COVID-19 emergency.

“These registrations were expedited by the Commission to facilitate the HSE’s Covid-19 contingency plans, and to allow for the transfer of residents into more appropriate and modern accommodation,” said Mr. Farrelly. “

“We will continue to work in collaboration with service providers and health officials to uphold the safety, rights and wellbeing of patients and residents by highlighting risks, and escalating any concerns we find to the HSE on an ongoing basis.”

Notes to the Editor:

About the Mental Health Commission

The Mental Health Commission is an independent statutory body. The primary functions of the Mental Health Commission are to foster and promote high standards of care and good practice in the delivery of mental health services and to ensure that the interests of those involuntarily admitted are protected, pursuant to the Mental Health Act 2001. The Mental Health Commission also has statutory responsibility for the Decision Support Service under the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015.

About the MHC Support & Risk Escalation framework

The Commission had been in regular contact with the 65 approved in-patient mental health units since the beginning of March in relation to plans to deal with the virus. It was given additional powers at the start of April to risk-rate these units, along with 111 24-hour community residences. Combined, these facilities care for more than 3,800 service users across the country.

Since those new powers were introduced on April 1st, the Commission has been supporting the HSE by identifying risks at these facilities, through its data information systems, to ensure that the health service is in possession of the correct information and can, if necessary, take immediate and effective action.

The Commission developed a standardised regulatory support framework and is working over the phone with all services to determine their risks in relation to staffing, equipment, premises and specialist support. If risk areas are identified, the Commission escalates those concerns to the highest levels of the HSE. In addition, the Commission has initiated a fast track registration scheme to enable immediate access to new and more suitable buildings.