



DL837 BA in NEW MEDIA STUDIES

Submission Form

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Signed: Mella Carron (on date of submission of assignment)

Date: 17.04.23

Headline:

Did we go too far? Could the banning of birth partners during the Covid-19 pandemic been more compassionate and understanding of women, their partners, and their mental health?

Subhead line:

Birth partners were treated as optional extras.

Pull Quote:

‘One thing you cannot pause or postpone however, is a pregnancy.’

On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) ‘declared Covid-19 to be a pandemic and urged the world to come together in order to slow down the spread of this virus.’¹

With the outbreak of this news, schools, pubs, cinemas, and workplaces were all closed for a two-week period. One could not have foreseen that two years later, the country would reopen, and life would continue as it once did. While this was the case for most establishments, hospitals were in a different category, and still are today. Understandably, hospitals were high risk areas. Voluntary operations postponed, visitations paused, and patient restrictions heightened. One thing you cannot pause or postpone however, is a pregnancy. Restrictions were implemented in maternity hospitals, affecting mothers and birth partners. The HSE announced ‘pregnant women are more likely to get very unwell and need treatment in intensive care than women who are not pregnant.’² ‘From 27 of March to 31 May 2020 the Irish

¹ Vi Perumal, Dr T Curran and Dr M Hunter, ‘First Case of Covid-19 In Ireland’, *Ulster Medical Journal*, 89, (2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7576383/#b2> [Accessed 20 March 2023]

² HSE, *Covid-19 and Pregnancy*, (2022) <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/covid19/people-at-higher-risk/covid19-and-pregnancy/> [Accessed 20 March 2023]

population were asked to enter lockdown to ‘flatten the curve’ of Covid-19 infection.’³ Lockdowns were extended and restrictions regarding social distancing were implemented on-and-off for a two-year period depending on the case numbers. During this time pregnant women and their partners were faced with the restrictions imposed by the HSE and maternity hospitals. Vaccines became available in late 2020 and gradually the population was vaccinated. In the meantime, new variants caused uncertainties, but, by June 2021 in-door dining with Covid-19 certificates was implemented. In October 2021, nightclubs reopened and by January 2022 almost all restrictions were lifted. However, this was not the case for maternity hospitals.

The HSE published new guidelines on a regular basis for pregnant women and maternity hospitals during 2022.⁴ Most appointments were via phone and mothers could nominate a support partner to attend scans, but all at the discretion of the hospital. What is most shocking, is that of February 2022, virtually every facility was open except for maternity facilities. Nominated support partners ‘may not be allowed to be with you during the start of labour, when you are first admitted to hospital.’⁵ Speaking to women who gave birth during Covid-19 all agreed, having their birth partner with them throughout the entire labour should have been deemed essential. Ciara Corr (32), a primary school teacher from Dundalk, had her first child at the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown. Oran was born on the 5th of April 2020. She was aware prior to giving birth that her birth partner could only accompany her while she was in active labour. ‘I was a bit worried; I didn’t even know what active labour meant! I couldn’t help thinking, what a terrible time to have a baby.’⁶ Women are at their most vulnerable, and

³ Noreen O’Leary et al, ‘COVID-19 Healthcare Politics in Ireland: A Rapid Review of the Initial Pandemic Response’, *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 49, (2021), 713-720, (p. 714) <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/630763/14034948211008371.pdf?sequence=1> [Accessed 5 March 2023]

⁴ HSE, *Hospital Service Disruptions*, (2021) <https://www2.hse.ie/services/disruptions/#maternity-hospitals> [Accessed 20 March 2023]

⁵ HSE, *Covid-19 and Pregnancy*, (2022) <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/covid19/people-at-higher-risk/covid19-and-pregnancy/> [Accessed 20 March 2023]

⁶ Ciara Corr, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 11th of April 2023

to be on their own has caused devastating long-lasting effects. When discussing the issue with Ciara regarding the affect the restriction had on women's mental health Ciara stated, 'I don't think any consideration was put into the mental well-being of women, or their partners.'⁷ Maternity hospitals continue to insist that this ban is Covid-19 related. It is only when the mother is moved to the private labour ward that birth partners are permitted to join in the final stages of labour.⁸

What is defined as 'the key stages of your pregnancy, labour and birth?'⁹ Who decided when a woman should be allowed have her birth partner with her? On investigation, each hospital operates their own restrictions, and as of March 2023, these are still unclear. What effect has these restrictions had on women? What lasting affects has it had on their mental well-being? And what changes can be made for the future of women in Ireland?

To assess the restrictions and the affect it had on women, I conducted several interviews with first time mothers, mothers in high-risk situations and a Psychiatry Registrar working in a maternity hospital during the pandemic. Ciara Higgins (36), accountant based in South Dublin, had her first child Lauren on the 4th of July 2020. She was six months pregnant when Covid-19 broke but felt no fear or anxiety prior to giving birth. She recounted the loneliness and isolation she felt in the maternity ward and how 'I cried for my husband, my mum, my friends, and then, for anyone who could help me.'¹⁰ In 2021, the then Lord Mayor, Hazel Chu and the Association for Improvement in Maternity Services (AIMS) protested about the restrictions, and asked for justice for women. Hazel Chu conducted a survey in 2021 seeking feedback from

⁷ Ciara Corr, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 11th of April 2023

⁸ HSE, *Covid-19 and Pregnancy*, (2022) <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/covid19/people-at-higher-risk/covid19-and-pregnancy/> [Accessed 20 March 2023]

⁹ HSE, *Hospital Service*, (2021) <https://www2.hse.ie/services/disruptions/> [Accessed 22 March 2023]

¹⁰ Ciara Higgins, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 21st of March 2023

mothers regarding the ban of birth partners. The findings were forwarded to three maternity hospitals in Dublin. AIMS addressed the HSE in May 2021 regarding the ‘continuing maternity restrictions, (despite a fully vaccinated health service and the opening of every other aspect of society)’.¹¹ They questioned the restrictions on partner presence in all aspects of pregnancy including labour and postnatal care and the non-uniformity approach adopted by various hospitals.¹² From an interview with Ailbhe Doherty (35) a Psychiatry Registrar based in Dublin, regarding the banning of birth partners and the affect it had on women’s mental health, she stated ‘Your birth partner is your voice. They are your legs, your voice, your emotional support. To be going through that without someone just holding your hand is still hard to imagine.’¹³

Leader for the Labour Party, Ivana Bacik, asked for a debate in the Seanad in 2021 regarding the restrictions. She stated ‘there has been a real lagging behind when it comes to women going into maternity hospitals to give birth.’¹⁴ She asked for a debate on women’s health given that Government and the Chief Medical Officer had agreed to lifting the ban and yet, it was still ongoing in certain hospitals. She further went on to say there are ‘reports from women, who are still in labour in hospital and yet, cannot have their partner with them. It has, in some cases led to very distressing experiences for women, and it really does need to be addressed.’¹⁵ Ciara Higgins recounted how her experience has left her traumatised with PTSD due to the fact that she endured her entire labour alone and her birth partner was only permitted to attend for the last thirty minutes. ‘Labour was the most difficult thing I have ever done, and I was alone. I

¹¹ Krysia Lynch, *AIMS Ireland Publishes PQS Submitted to Minister of Health on 12th May 2021*, (2021) <<http://aimsireland.ie/aims-ireland-publishes-pqs-submitted-to-minister-of-health-on-12th-may-2021/>> [Accessed 24 February 2023]

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ailbhe Doherty, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 15th of March 2023

¹⁴ Ivana Bacik, *Seanad Éireann Order of Business*, YouTube, 14 June 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBP_yNWDod8> [accessed 4 April 2023]

¹⁵ Ibid.

was in the most vulnerable position of my life...and I was without any support.’¹⁶ Ailbhe Doherty expressed the view as a medical professional. She supported the restrictions initially. However, she couldn’t understand the longevity of them. Her challenges of dealing with patients during Covid-19 relied on telephone conversations. ‘A lot of my job relies on body movement, eye contact, and knowing their supportive network.’¹⁷ She agreed the ban was too harsh on women and their partners. ‘You are in this vulnerable place, and the restrictions were too slow to be lifted. It’s a classic example of Ireland and negligence towards womens’ needs. I think we were forgotten, and I think women had to shout a lot louder!’¹⁸

Another supportive online community that was quickly established was the Facebook group ‘In Our Shoes Covid Pregnancy,’¹⁹ whose aim was to raise awareness regarding the restrictions. They organised petitions and marches to end the restriction of birth partners and used the hashtag #BetterMaternityCare. With 9.6K followers, they built an online community and brought awareness of the anxiety and the fear involved in pregnancy. They highlighted the fact that no woman should have to be alone while their birth partner sits in the carpark. An interview with Máire Marmion (37), a biochemist from Dublin, who had her second child during the Covid-19 Pandemic, Eabha, born on the 1st of February 2021. While her birth partner sat anxiously in the carpark waiting for updates, Máire felt secure in the hospital. ‘David was able to drop me to the hospital door, and then he had to sit in the carpark not knowing what was going on. For him, it was horrific. He had no idea what was happening to his wife or his unborn baby.’²⁰ Unfortunately, due to the restrictions David missed the birth of baby Eabha. This ‘has had a big affect on David missing the birth of Eabha and not being with me during

¹⁶ Ciara Higgins, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 21st of March 2023

¹⁷ Ailbhe Doherty, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 15th of March 2023

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Facebook, *In Our Shoes Covid Pregnancy*, (2020) <<https://www.facebook.com/inourshoescovidpregnancy>> [Accessed 20 March 2023]

²⁰ Máire Marmion, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 22nd of March 2023

that difficult time. You're having a baby, there are two of you, there should be two of you for the whole process.' ²¹

The restriction of birth partners has resulted in a number of mental health issues for both mothers and birth partners. The most poignant message I took away from my interview with Ciara Higgins was how she felt invisible, a nuisance and that she had no voice. This unfortunately was a common thread for so many mothers. Thousands of women, felt alone, unheard and invisible. Should such a situation occur again, Ciara stated 'I implore the hospitals to allow birth partners into the wards to avoid this happening to more people. I wish I was the only one who went through this pain, but I know sadly, I am not.' ²²

A study published by Trinity's School of Nursing and Midwifery revealed that 'no national database exists to collect information about women's mental health in pregnancy and postpartum in Ireland.' ²³ This study found that only '5% of women reported symptoms of moderate to severe anxiety' ²⁴. How are we to improve the mental well-being of women if we are not collecting any relevant data? Ailbhe Doherty explained that this is one of the biggest problems in Ireland, and that we need to put correct measures in place. Countries such as the United Kingdom and America have national integrated systems, which is beneficial for both women and medical practitioners.

²¹ Máire Marmion, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 22nd of March 2023

²² Ciara Higgins, Interviewed by Mella Carron, About the Banning of Birth Partners, 21st of March 2023

²³ Trinity College Dublin, *Reality of Maternal Mental Health For First Time Mums in Ireland: Study*, (2022), [https://www.tcd.ie/news_events/articles/reality-of-maternal-mental-health-for-first-time-mums-in-ireland-study/#:~:text=2%25%20\(one%20in%20five%20women,highest%20at%206%20months%20postpartum](https://www.tcd.ie/news_events/articles/reality-of-maternal-mental-health-for-first-time-mums-in-ireland-study/#:~:text=2%25%20(one%20in%20five%20women,highest%20at%206%20months%20postpartum) [Accessed 10 March 2023]

²⁴ Ibid.

I question why as a country we are so far behind. I question why the Government don't acquire these figures to see the damage that has been done to women in maternity hospitals. And I question if maternity hospitals will implement their own restrictions going forward. AIMS states that while 'the protection and safety of maternity care professionals is paramount, so too is the protection of the perinatal mental health of the birthing person and their partners.'²⁵ I believe they were forgotten during Covid-19.

My interviews show a similar trend regarding the Covid-19 pandemic partner ban. No one should have to give birth alone, and a birth partner should be with you from the moment you enter the hospital rather than being treated as an optional extra. None of these women believe proper consideration was given to their mental well-being, and that the restrictions were disproportionate to the needs of the mother and her birth partner. Consistent restrictions should have been applied in all maternity hospitals. The HSE must learn from the experience in what worked and more importantly, what did not. An FOI request from Holles Street Maternity Hospital, The Rotunda and The Coombe Hospitals was sent on the 20th of March 2023, regarding the surveys carried out by Hazel Chu, in 2021 to which I await a reply.

²⁵ Krysia Lynch, 'AIMS Ireland Seeks Justification for Banning Birthing Women Having their Partner Present during Labour and Birth in Ireland' (2020) <<http://aimsireland.ie/aims-ireland-seeks-justification-for-banning-birthing-women-having-their-partner-present-during-labour-and-birth-in-ireland/>> [Accessed 25 February 2023]



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