

## **Covid-19 and General Practice: Part 6**

Interview with Dr. Ray Walley MRCGP FRCGP,  
Member of the National Covid-19 GP Liaison Committee

General Practice is represented by high level members of the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) and Irish College of General Practice (ICGP) in liaison with the HSE and Department of Health in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This briefing covers the period 15/02/21 – 12/04/21.

The National GP / HSE Liaison Committee teleconference on a formal weekly basis at 7.30am Fridays with further engagement continuing between the secretariats/practitioners of IMO / ICGP / HSE / Dept. of Health where appropriate.

### **How has General Practice continued to respond to Covid-19:**

General Practice has been the first port of call for all initial Covid related engagements including telephone consultations and referral for testing, Respiratory assessment consultations, Covid-19 vaccinations. Practice teams continue to provide non-covid acute and chronic care consultations.

The following are the number of Covid consultation/test referrals done by GPs. Referral for testing was based on satisfaction of criteria set down by the HPSC/HSE algorithm. All referrals and results were in electronic format with results also being texted to patients. GPs followed up results with a telephone consultation.

- During Sept & Oct 2020, there were an average of > 8,000 daily community referrals with a peak of over 15,000 on 19th October.
- Between November and mid December 2020, there were an average of 4,300 community referrals for COVID testing per day (30,000 per week).
- From mid-December onwards there was with an average of over 9,000 community referrals for COVID testing per day between 16th & 25th December.
- Referrals increased further after Christmas, with an average of almost 19,000 community referrals for COVID testing per day between 26th & 31st December.
- Referrals peaked at 28,382 on 30th December, with a 7-day rolling total peak of 132,964 between 29th December & 4th January.

- Referrals trended downwards from mid-January but remained high throughout the month, with an average of over 9,000 per day.
- Referrals during February & March were lower than January, but still higher than last November. Average of over 5000 per day (36,000 per week).

The most recent figure of 4/4/21 showed a weekly referral rate of 38,418 thankfully continuing the downward trend with a 11% reduction on the previous week with an average of 5,488 referrals per day.

### **Covid-19 Vaccinations:**

- By the 11/4/21 454,000 doses of Pfizer / Moderna Covid vaccines had been administered to over 70-year-old patients by GP Practice teams with a further 185,000 doses due to be administered the week of 12th of April then totalling 639,000 doses.
- The reflects the workload of circa 1300 GP practices The focus of the week of 4th of April was largely on completing dose 1 vaccination of the 75-79yo age cohort and commencing the 70 – 74 yo cohort whilst continuing dose 2 for 80-84 yo. Whilst going to press the Cork and Galway vaccine hubs were scheduled for circa 2400 patients with a mix of dose 1 and dose 2 patients due. These hubs were for practices that has 199 or less over 70yo patient cohorts and allowed economies of scale for mass vaccination. By the weekend of 11th April, the DCU Covid Hub over a number of weekends had administered vaccines to 12,000 patients and was gearing up for 2500 on Saturday 17th of April.
- By the weekend of 11th of April general Practice was responsible for half of all vaccines administered in Ireland and all vaccines administered in the community setting to the over 70s population.
- General Practice have also played its part in identifying over 70 yo patients who were too infirm to attend either a GP practice or Hub. This totalled 1800 patients Nationally. Vaccination of this cohort is still ongoing.
- A dedicated webinar was organised by the IMO in regard to the process for ordering and delivery. 2000 participants took part in the webinar.
- GPs were asked to indicate their interest in identifying and vaccinating Very High Risk patients from the NIAC allocation Group 4 – people aged between 16 – 69 who are at very high risk: The greater majority of practices have signed up to this campaign.

This patient group includes:

- Diabetics with a Hba1c >58
- Patients with BMI >40
- Patients suffering from severe CF / COPD or Pulmonary Fibrosis

Staggered Deliveries to practices are to commence of the Astra Zeneca vaccine on the week of 12th of April with practices advised to await NIAC guidance whilst they are reviewing the most recent EMA advisory.

## Education and the Media:

The IMO and ICGP have recognised the importance of continued education of all Medical Practitioners and have organised webinars on a weekly/monthly basis. Most recent webinars have included the planned rollout of the Pandemic vaccine.

Members of the communication committee have been supported by written briefings from ICGP / IMO and HSE.

GP Media expert opinion placement has been a priority for both IMO and ICGP to ensure knowledgeable commentary from General Practice.

The IMO and ICGP have ensured that timely opinion is accessible through their respective public relations units.

The ICGP continues to update its excellent website daily and is the most up to date information point for GP educational issues.

## Covid-19 GP Hubs:

Covid-19 Hubs are for Covid-19 + / or Presumed Covid-19 + patients and GP referral only.

Since 12th April 2020, there were a total of 12,256 attendances at community assessment hubs. This equates to an average of 236 attendances per week, with a peak of 785 attendances in the week commencing 10th January.

At the peak of the pandemic in December there were 17 hubs in operation with some hubs referring onwards up to 40% of assessments to Emergency Departments whilst the remaining 60% were managed in the community after discharge from the Hub by their referring GP.

Exclusion criteria for hubs included:

- Acutely unwell patients who require AMAU/ Emergency Dept. referral
- Non Covid-19 patients
- Maternity patients
- Children under 16 years of age

## Ongoing challenges for General Practice include (in no particular order):

Representations have been made to the HSE on the following issues:

- Highlighting the importance of hospitals knowing if a first Covid vaccine given in hospital that the hospital was also responsible for the second vaccine dose
- Highlighting the importance of hospitals being alert to cancer referrals and appropriate timely triage.
- Highlighting the increased fragility of elderly patients who have reduced activity and increased falls risk to plan proactively for suitable guidance.
- Highlighting the importance of improved early and accurate communication on vaccine deliveries
- Ensuring there will be a review process in place for vaccinated patients who may acquire Covid-19.
- Advice of how specific needles and syringes allow extra doses from Covid-19 vaccines and if possible, these to be obtained.

**Further Challenges:**

GP workloads continue to be prioritised on clinical basis with Urgents taking precedence over routines, with the administrative task list secondary to clinical issues.

Personal Healthcare of both GPs and their staff is emphasised to ensure maintenance of good physical and mental health.

**This is in no way a complete overview of work done by both the IMO and ICGP liaison group but is a summary of some priorities dealt with to date.**