

The Irish Times - Friday, March 5, 2010

HSE ordered to speed up reporting details of child deaths:

JAMIE SMYTHMARY MINIHAN and

THE HSE will have to publish reports into the death of any child in State care within two months of their completion under new guidelines to be announced next week by a Government-appointed health watchdog.

The Health Information and Quality Authority (Hiqa) is also expected to recommend the establishment of a panel of experts to review child deaths in State care, which would be chaired by a person independent of the HSE.

The guidelines are being prepared by the agency as part of the Government's reaction to the publication of the Ryan report into child sex abuse in State-run institutions. But they have taken on added significance and impetus following the publication by Fine Gael TD Alan Shatter of the HSE report into the tragic death of mother of two Tracey Fay (18).

The report strongly criticises what it says is the State's chaotic provision of care accommodation, the lack of a systematic care plan and a failure to provide addiction services. It was completed by the HSE in October 2008 but it chose not to publish it. The HSE has denied a "cover-up", saying it wanted to contact the family before publication.

However, Opposition TDS strongly criticised the HSE yesterday following an admission that it has not published a single report into the death of a child in State care in five years. HSE director of integrated services Laverne McGuinness told an Oireachtas committee yesterday that no report had been published since the HSE was formed in 2005.

She said 10 reports into the deaths of children were currently being compiled, two were almost ready for publication and two were going through the "legal process".

The HSE claimed that 20 children had died while in State care over the past decade. However, Minister of State for Children Barry Andrews said in the Dáil yesterday that 23 children had died during this period.

Mr Shatter said the HSE had developed an unnecessary culture of secrecy.

However, Mr Andrews denied attempting to cover up unpublished reports on children who have died in State care. "There is no intention whatsoever to cover up these cases. I have no agenda to protect any reputations, corporate or otherwise," he said.

He warned that people would be reluctant to co-operate with inquiries in future, following the publication of the Tracey Fay report by Fine Gael on Wednesday.

"You can be sure that if the precedent set yesterday is to continue, that nobody will co-operate with a non-statutory inquiry because they can safely assume that some member of the Houses of the Oireachtas will publish a report," he said.

The new guidelines prepared by Hiqa will transform the way the HSE commissions investigations into the deaths of children while in State care.

Among the recommendations are that all deaths of children while in State care should be notified to the authority within 48 hours; a new panel of experts chaired by a person independent of the HSE and the Government should be set up; the executive summary or full report into the death of a child must be published within a matter of days and no longer than two months.

A Hiqa spokesman confirmed last night it would publish the guidelines next week as part of the drive to help create a more robust local and national child protection system and boost independence and transparency. “These children are among the most vulnerable in our society and have the right to be protected and cared for,” he said.

The HSE has indicated that it will comply with the guidelines.

It is understood that several reports into the death of children while in care have already been sent to Hiqa in advance of the formal publication of the guidelines.