

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thursday 23 April 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000039

Question Number: 30

Question Subject: Strategy for testing and tracing

Type of Questions: Question in Writing

Questioner: Senator Lambie

Question:

What is the Government's strategy for testing and tracing the population? Who are you going to test? How (what test?) and how quickly can that data be processed (i.e. what is the capacity of our labs to process the tests)?

Answer:

COVID-19 testing is undertaken in accordance with epidemiological and clinical criteria outlined in the COVID-19 Communicable Diseases Network Australia National [Guidelines](#) for Public Health Units. Our testing strategy focuses on testing people with COVID-19 symptoms. Our case detection strategy relies on people with the relevant symptoms and recognised exposure risk seeking healthcare, and a healthcare provider identifying that they may have the disease and ordering the appropriate test. This approach has recently been broadened to encourage all people with respiratory symptoms, irrespective of exposure risk, to be tested.

In addition, targeted testing of specific groups or occupations that are more likely to reveal the presence of community transmission and are a representative sample of the community, are proposed.

Australia is supported by an expert network of public and private laboratories with the capability to detect COVID-19 in humans. The test for the detection of acute SARS-CoV-2 infection (the virus that causes COVID-19) is the real time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test which detects nucleic acid sequences that are specific to the virus.

The time to return a confirmed test result within a laboratory is quick. The overall turn-around time from specimen collection to result varies by jurisdiction and depends on where the specimen is collected. Delays can sometimes occur due to referral processing, sample packaging, batching, transport etc.

The capacity for testing laboratories to produce results will also depend on the number of tests requested for processing on any given day. There is sufficient capacity within the Australian laboratory system to meet the current testing demand for COVID-19.

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Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thursday 23 April 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000040

Question Number: 31

Question Subject: Anti-body Testing

Type of Questions: Question in Writing

Questioner: Senator Lambie

Question:

Is the Australian government doing anti-body testing across the population?

Answer:

- No, the Australian Government is not doing antibody testing across the population.
- Current testing is focused on Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing to diagnose acute SARS-CoV-2 infection.
- PCR testing involves collection of a respiratory sample which is then analysed to detect nucleic acid sequences specific to the virus.
- Serological tests (blood tests) detect whether an individual has developed antibodies in response to a prior infection with COVID-19. To return a positive test result, enough time must have elapsed after infection to develop a response (typically at least 2-4 weeks).
- Serological testing can be used to clinically diagnose past infection in people who test negative for PCR. It can also be used to conduct serology studies which may improve understanding about undetected community spread within the Australian community.
- The Australian Government is in the early stages of development of a serological surveillance (serosurveillance) strategy which is intended to provide overall guidance on the national use of serology surveys to support control strategies for COVID-19 in Australia.