Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Budget Estimates 2015 - 2016, 1 – 2 June 2015

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OUTCOME: 1 - Population Health

Topic: National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

Type of Question: Hansard Page 89

Senator: Xenophon, Nick

Question:

Senator XENOPHON: I have questions in relation to the National Bowel Cancer Screening program. It relates to an issue raised by a constituent. I note that it provides free test kits for the detection of bowel cancer to men and women aged 50, 55, 60, 65, 70 and 74. I understand that Dorevitch Pathology carries out tests on behalf of the government. Other companies also use bowel cancer screening; however, this is on a user-pays basis. A constituent has recently contacted me with concerns about different faecal occult blood test, FOBT, results that came from the NBCSP and a private company who have both been provided with samples from the same faecal specimen. The NBCSP FOBT results stated no blood was detected in the sample whereas the private company's results reported that the blood was detected, which caused some distress to the constituent. He was advised that it was possible exposure to heat during transport may have caused the variation in results. The broad question that I am happy for you to take on notice is: what transport policies are used by the department for NBCSP samples, specifically what steps does the department take to minimise heat exposure of samples and has there been a review of the current government's NBCSP test and its accuracies compared to other bowel screening tests currently on the market and recommended by the Cancer Council?
Dr Southern: We probably will need to take that one on notice. I think you have the record for speaking faster than anyone.
Senator XENOPHON: I am conscious of the committee's time. Senator Dastyari can sometimes beat me at it, which is saying something. My fourth question, which I am happy for you to take on notice, is: why did the government choose this type of test over other types of tests available? Fifthly, I understand the FOBT offered by ColoVantage is stable for 14 days up to the temperature of 37 degrees Celsius. Does the NBCSP FOBT have the same stability?
Dr Southern: I will take that one on notice.

Answer:

1. Completed test samples are returned to the pathology provider by regular post, using Australia Post logistics. The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (the Program) provides the return packaging for completed tests, which includes four layers of specific protective packaging in compliance with the relevant standards for the transportation of biological samples.

2. The Department of Health has policies in place to ensure safety, performance and quality in the Program. This includes measures for safeguarding and managing the impact of severe climate conditions on the sensitivity and specificity of the immunochemical faecal occult blood test (iFOBT). In particular, the Program has a Hot Zone Policy, which limits the sending of kits to months of the year where the average temperature is at or below 30 degrees Celsius. All Program participants are also provided with a flyer in the test kit package, which provides advice on sample stability and how to minimise the risk of test samples being exposed to high temperatures.

3. The 2012-13 open tender process for the supply and pathology analysis of FOBT supplies and services for the Program was the most recent review of the Program's current test. In addition to formal evaluation of all tests tendered for use under the Program through the tender process, the Program actively monitors existing and new bowel screening technology through the Program's Clinical Advisory Group. The CAG is comprised of clinicians with expertise in bowel cancer and screening and advises the Program on bowel cancer screening policy issues, including existing, new and emerging screening technologies as well as related clinical issues.

   An independent review on the effectiveness of emerging technologies (blood and stool biomarker testing) for the detection of bowel cancer in comparison with iFOBT was also recently undertaken by the Health Policy Advisory Committee on Technology. This review is due to be publically released in August 2015.

4. The Department undertook an open tender process to select the *New Hemtube (B)* supplied by Specialist Diagnostic Services (trading as Dorevitch Pathology), which was finalised in February 2013. Tenders were evaluated by a panel that included clinical and technical experts.

   In selecting the most suitable test for use by the Program for population screening, there was a range of essential test performance characteristics considered. These included test and sample stability including sensitivity and specificity for advanced adenomas and bowel cancer. In addition, the tender considered essential requirements for the pathology provider in undertaking pathology analysis such as the level of automation and the reproducibility of the test results. The evaluators also considered overall value for money in delivering a national service. The *New Hemtube (B)* offered by Specialist Diagnostic Services was assessed as the best test for use by the Program.

5. The '*New Hemtube (B)*' iFOBT kit currently used by the Program is included on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG) and has been assessed against claims for having minimum sample stability for a period of 14 days being the period between the time of collection and the time of testing, at temperatures of up to, and including 30 degrees Celsius. This was a minimum requirement in the 2012-13 tender process.