



NEWS

Covid-19: healthcare staff in hotspot areas are prioritised as testing expands

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The BMJ

Medical leaders have welcomed the government's "belated" decision to expand covid-19 testing capacity but said it has taken too long to commence and is still far too limited.

On 27 March the government announced it was opening three new laboratories in England to focus on processing covid-19 testing samples from healthcare staff.

Staff in the worst affected parts of the country, such as London, are being prioritised, especially in areas of highest impact, such as intensive care, with all health and care staff following as capacity increases.

The first laboratory opened this weekend and processed around 800 tests over the two day period of 28-29 March. The government aims to increase this to around 1000 tests per day and is to open two more laboratories imminently to boost capacity further.

But the BMA said this number needed to be rapidly increased as a matter of urgency.

BMA council chair Chand Nagpaul said, "While it's positive that testing has belatedly started, it is currently being prioritised for certain groups. The BMA is therefore still being contacted by large numbers of other doctors, frustrated at having to self-isolate, asking when and how they will be able to get tested. It's been weeks since the government said they would make priority testing for healthcare workers happen. The profession deserves this to become a reality now."

He added, "It's vital that testing is imminently expanded to all healthcare staff and their households who are self-isolating, to allow those who do not have the virus to get back to the NHS to treat patients and support their colleagues during this unprecedented crisis. It's clear that Britain needs to drastically scale up its testing capacity in order to meet this demand."

The Royal College of Physicians estimates that around one in four NHS doctors are currently off work, either because they have the virus or they are self-isolating.

The laboratories, which will operate until the covid-19 pandemic is over, are being set up using equipment loaned from universities, research institutes, and industry. Companies Thermo Fisher Scientific and Randox, which manufacture the equipment, are providing "extensive logistical and technical support," the Department of Health and Social Care said.

Jenny Harries, deputy chief medical officer, said, "There are bound to be teething problems, so we cannot switch on hundreds of thousands of lab tests overnight. But we hope that soon these hub laboratories will be operating round the clock, allowing us to significantly scale up our testing."

In addition to the new laboratories, the department promised on 18 March¹ to boost the capacity of existing NHS and Public Health England (PHE) laboratories to 25 000 tests a day by the week beginning 6 April.

The government said it was also "urgently analysing" the reliability of home testing kits that do not need laboratories. Last week PHE's National Infection Service interim director Sharon Peacock said these would be available "within days," but England's chief medical officer Chris Whitty subsequently downplayed suggestions that kits would be imminently available.²

The department said online retailer Amazon and Royal Mail have agreed to assist with the logistics of getting home testing kits to staff once they have been validated. High street pharmacy chain Boots has been supplying volunteer clinicians to take part in initial trials of kits. But testing will not be done at stores and tests will not be available to buy over the counter or online from any retailers, the department said.

1 Department of Health and Social Care. 18 March 2020. Testing for coronavirus (COVID-19) will increase to 25 000 a day. www.gov.uk/government/news/testing-for-coronavirus-covid-19-will-increase-to-25-000-a-day.

2 Schraer R. Coronavirus: home tests not available "next week." BBC News. 26 March 2020. www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52035615.

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