Covid-19: GPs can’t get results of tests carried out at drive-through centres

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The BMJ

General practices have been left without access to many thousands of covid-19 test results for their patients carried out at drive-through centres in England.

The centres, whose logistics are being handled by the private company Deloitte, have conducted hundreds of thousands of covid-19 tests as part of “pillar 2” of the government’s testing programme.

The government said when it launched the scheme in March that results would be linked to patients’ GP medical records and shared with practices and local authorities.

But GPs are reporting that this has not happened.

Helen Salisbury, a GP in Oxford, said, “We have no access to testing information for our patients at all. It’s a real restriction on families. A large proportion of cases have been in the community, yet GPs have been totally left out of the whole conversation.”

Salisbury said that currently the only way she could know whether a patient has tested positive for covid-19 was if they had been admitted to hospital. “As of last Friday [1 May] I had coded 99 patients with suspected covid-19, and only five confirmed with a positive test,” she said. “If we’re going to get this mass contact tracing going, we need to know what’s going on.”

Salisbury criticised the government’s decision to outsource testing to a private firm rather than building up the existing system, where general practices take swabs and send them to local laboratories that send the results to Public Health England to do contact tracing.

“The existing system wasn’t geared up for this volume of testing, but it could have been built on,” she said. “Instead they’ve outsourced it to a management consultancy with little expertise in this field.”

Nick Mann, a GP in Hackney, east London, said, “I’ve not been notified of any central testing being done, and we are certainly not getting notifications into the medical record,” he said.

He added, “The idea of setting up parallel testing in my view is stupid and has now been shown up to be completely inappropriate,” he said. “The result is absolute chaos.”

Jackie Applebee, a GP and chair of Tower Hamlets Local Medical Committee in east London, said it was a similar story for practices in Tower Hamlets, which like Hackney has one of the highest incidences of covid-19 in the country. “Failure to ensure that the results are sent to the GP record is just the latest in a litany of government failures during this pandemic,” she said.

Richard Vautrey, chair of the BMA’s General Practitioners Committee, said the committee was aware that information was not being provided to GPs or added to patients’ records and had raised the issue with NHS England and NHS Improvement. “It’s important to do this, but it also needs to be done in an appropriate way, as practices will also need to know what information has been already given to patients, particularly those who have a positive test,” he said.

The Department for Health and Social Care said that data from the drive-through testing programme had been shared with Public Health England. It said it was working on a solution for local authorities to access data and to get covid-19 test results into individual general practice records in England accurately and in a way that minimised any risks to clinical safety.

As well as helping to build testing facilities, Deloitte is also supporting the introduction of home testing and satellite test sites.

A Deloitte spokesperson said, “Deloitte does not run or manage any covid-19 test centres. Alongside many other public and private sector partners, we are supporting DHSC to help accelerate and scale testing capacity and are also providing operational support for the procurement process of PPE.”