CONCERN ABOUT LATERAL FLOW TEST USE

Inappropriate use of lateral flow tests by patients with symptoms

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Concerns have been raised about the use of lateral flow tests in the government’s mass testing programme as a means of facilitating the easing of the lockdown measures and the opening up of society.¹

As a general practitioner I have encountered increased use of these tests among my patients, largely in the context of work based asymptomatic testing. But in recent weeks I have consulted with patients who have symptoms that could be due to covid-19 and are undertaking lateral flow tests in lieu of booking PCR tests. These patients are potentially falsely reassuring themselves that they do not have covid-19. As a result, they do not self-isolate and are potentially facilitating spread of the virus.

Given that these tests are so readily and easily available,² I do not think it is feasible to restrict access. As professionals we are aware that the sensitivity of these tests for detecting covid-19 is very low.³ But we cannot expect the public to know this, which seems to have been overlooked by the government. I think the government should make a concerted effort to educate the public on the intended use of these tests. This should probably be backed up by public health and healthcare input. Without this, especially with the emergence of new variants, there is a real risk that transmission of the virus will increase, undermining the efforts and gains made so far.

Competing interests: No competing interests

1 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: MHRA is concerned over use of rapid lateral flow devices for mass testing. BMJ 2021;373:n1090. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1090 pmid: 33910913
3 Deeks JJ, Raffle AE. Lateral flow tests cannot rule out SARS-CoV-2 infection. BMJ 2020;371:m4787. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4787 pmid: 33310701

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