



Transcript

National Operations Centre COVID-19 Update

Update 6 of 2020

Presenter: Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director (PNGIMR)

Date: 26th March 2020

Time: 10:15am

TESTING

From the Institute of Medical Research side, most of the testing have been negative. PCR Testing (PCR is shorthand for a simple but very useful procedure in molecular biology called the **polymerase chain reaction**. It is a technique used to amplify a segment of DNA of interest or produce lots and lots of copies) are done at the PNG Institute of Medical Research in Goroka, led by Dr Janet Gare and Professor Pomat.

We are working on establishing a facility here in Port Moresby, with the support of the National Health Department. At the moment, we are planning to start these services at UPNG's school of Medicine and IMR facility beginning on Monday (30/03/2020) and on Tuesday (31/03/2020) with the training of staff at Central Public Health Laboratory (CPHL) and the work to start in Port Moresby beginning on Wednesday (01/04/2020).

That is the report from the Institute of Medical Research, in collaboration with the National Department of Health.

QUESTIONS

Rebekkak Kuku – The National Newspaper – Reporter

Any update on the facility at Bomana for a possible isolation site.

Hon. Bryan Kramer

At this stage, no. We are waiting for WHO officials who visited that site to give their briefing to the Department of Health.

They have asked for floor plans and designs for that facility. Hopefully, the decision will come today and the facility will come online.

However, it is an Australian built facility for the purpose of Papua New Guinea to transit refugees or non-refugees out of PNG. It will be a decision, once a recommendation comes from the Department of Health, then NEC will give final approval.

I am aware that the Prime Minister in the last NEC meeting did give us the approval to go in and carry out an assessment.

Glenda Popot – FM100 Report

Dr Laman, can you confirm the figures of people you have tested so far and whether you have the facilities for the final test or do you have to send samples to Melbourne, Australia?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

As of yesterday, the total samples tested was 43 and there were about 15 samples sent up from the contact tracing that the Minister for Police referred to.

In addition, there were 14 from the Central Public Health Laboratory. We will have more updates on those later this evening.

This brings the number of samples to over 70. The results will be known by the Minister and Health Department Team after lunch today.

In terms of testing facilities, IMR is a WHO accredited laboratory and it has the authority to do corona virus and virology testing in the country. The IMR does not need to send samples overseas but at the request of the Government, that can be done.

This is not what the IMR has established because of the Corona Virus. It has been doing flu surveillance for the past 15 to 20 years, as part of virology testing at the Institute and it has the capacity and the WHO accreditation to do virology testing in country.

Elias Nunu – Post Courier Reporter

The first case, is it because the Government asked that you had to send it to Australia or was it an independent decision?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

The samples were sent to Australia because of the sensitivity of the first case as well as the request from the Government, it was important for us as a Government Institute to be able to do what is right for the country as well.

Glenda Popot – FM100 Report

Your set up at UPNG, do you have all the machines?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

The setup at UPNG does PCR testing for Malaria as well as other viruses, so the technique is already in country. It is done for other diseases but for corona virus, this is the optimization and making sure that things are working for this particular bug.

Those are the work our team are working on at the moment. PCR testing has been in country as part of IMR's activities for a number of years.

Glenda Popot – FM100 Report

So you have the testing machines for the corona virus?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

Yes. However, those are not of care testing that you could set up overnight. This are highly skilled tests that requires a lot of technical skills as well as specialist re-agents. Procurements of those will need to come from overseas. Those are not things that you could quickly do overnight and so those are the things that we will need to optimize.

Also, the laboratory would need WHO accreditation to ensure credibility issues are maintained for qualities and standards

Glenda Popot – FM100 Report

What about the expertise?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

We have a lot of expertise. Not just at IMR but also from the Central Public Health Laboratory. People who have expertise in molecular diagnostics.

Starting on Monday and Tuesday, people from the Central Public Health Laboratories will be working with scientists from IMR to do trainings, particularly for COVID-19.

The plan is to transfer those skills out to CPHL to carry on doing COVID-19 testing.

NBC Reporter

Dr Laman, I know IMR has been stressing a lot in their press releases on local transmission. Just briefing clarify for our purposes and our audiences' purposes, local transmissions and imported cases?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

To date, in terms of local transmissions, there has been no evidence of local transmission, in terms of transmission within the country but, that is based on the number of testings that has been done.

The only isolated case was a traveler coming into the country, as an imported case.

In terms of local transmission, there is no evidence of local transmission at present.

Rebekkak Kuku – The National Newspaper – Reporter

How long does it take for the test results to come back?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

There are a lot of issues in ensuring the cost effectiveness of the testing. It is more cost effective to run many samples at once. There is what is called 96 well plates. We can put 96 samples onto the well plates and run it for three hours. This are done by our virology experts at the PNGIMR in Goroka.

Ideally, the tests would take three hours but, there are certain parts to it that they need to extract DNA and viral RNA work as well, then the actual testing itself will take place. So to be consistent, rather than giving hourly updates, we are giving daily updates.

This is the stance so that we maintain the quality and standards as well. If the Institute is forced to rush, then we will be missing a couple of steps. For the PMGIMR, it is important for us to maintain those standards for quality control as well.

Rebekkak Kuku – The National Newspaper – Reporter

At the moment, how many pending cases do we have?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

We will have an update after lunch.

Theckla Gunka – EMTV Reporter

Is the IMR receiving any funding from the Government?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

PNGIMR is a Statutory Body of the Government. It is supported by the Government but in terms of PCR testing, we are in collaboration with them (NDoH) and the Government is supporting us in so many different ways as well.

Rebekkak Kuku – The National Newspaper – Reporter

Do we have enough test kits?

Dr. Moses Laman – Deputy Director – PNGIMR

Depends on what type of test you are referring to because there are different types of test kits.

Test for PCR at the moment, there is enough. The SoE team and Health Department is also supported by WHO. They sent enough test kits to Goroka to be able to run corona virus tests.

Theckla Gunka – EMTV Reporter

Is updates on the testing kits from Australia?

Hon. Bryan Kramer

Since coming in this morning, I have not received any updates.

Just to be clear, there were 72 test samples sent in. 43 have returned negative and cleared, 14 are in the process of being tested. 15 samples from contact tracing have been sent up and are inline to be tested.

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