

## Position Statement

**Subject: Covid-19 Testing as we learn to live with Covid-19**  
**Approval Date: October 2021**  
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**Review By: Microbiology Advisory Committee**  
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The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (the College) affirms that pathology testing using the gold standard SARS-CoV-2 PCR test to identify the causative virus of COVID-19, has been the 'eyes and ears' of the public health response to COVID-19 and will continue to have an important role as the pandemic progresses.

The public health responses adopted by Governments in Australia and New Zealand required a significant and sustained increase in testing capacity. Highly accurate, large scale PCR testing delivered by Pathology laboratories has underpinned the successful public health response to COVID-19. As of 25 October 2021 there have been 42.2 million PCR tests performed in Australia and 3.9 million in New Zealand.

The response from Australasian laboratories to the massive challenge of providing high quality laboratory testing during the pandemic has been extraordinary. The following points are worth noting in the Australasian response:

- the virus isolate and sequence from Australia's index case was the first to be shared with accredited laboratories globally
- the rapid, careful evaluation of a wide range of new diagnostic assays against the newly emergent pandemic virus to select the best performing assays
- the scaling up of laboratories to perform tests in volumes never before seen
- the development of one of the world's first External Quality Assurance programs
- inclusion of SARS-CoV-2 Testing in the NATA/RCPA requirements for laboratory accreditation
- the development of innovative approaches to testing and reporting to deal with the volume of tests and the worldwide shortage of reagents, such as the use of 3D printing to produce swabs, use of saliva as an alternative sample, pooling of samples and SMS transmission of results to expedite result delivery.
- continual provision of high-quality consultative advice on the appropriate use of tests

As Australia approaches the 80% double COVID-19 vaccination coverage of the eligible population over the age of 16 years (as outlined in the Australian Government National Plan) and restrictions ease it is the College's position that we will need to retain the ability to scale-up SARS-CoV-2 PCR testing. This capacity to cope with surges in PCR testing is in order to support the public health response to the management of the pandemic, at least for the next 12 to 18 months. If we don't do this testing, the public health response would be less effective and we would essentially be running blind.

The situation in NZ is evolving at a different pace compared to Australia and the NZ government is yet to release their strategic intent with regards to testing options. It is likely that the testing strategy will differ between NZ and Australia, however the guiding principles are the same, we need the optimal tests that are fit for purpose and can be performed in a turn-around-time that appropriately informs public health responses.

High levels of PCR testing will still be required to accurately understand what is happening with the spread, transmissibility and virulence of the virus, and to dynamically monitor vaccine effectiveness. There will also be the requirement for strategic genomic surveillance for SARS-CoV-2 to track outbreaks and to identify the emergence of new variants of COVID-19 circulating in the community. As new treatments become available, accurate and timely molecular results will continue to be required.

There has been variation in the rate and spread of COVID-19, vaccination rates and management in each jurisdiction and country and this will continue. Thus, how each jurisdiction and country manage the pandemic going forward, in particular the Testing, Tracing, Isolating and Quarantining approach (TTIQ) will need to be adapted.

It is important for Governments to remember that when increasing PCR test numbers, machines may be upscaled fairly quickly provided there are sufficient reagents. But having the appropriately trained staff to undertake specimen reception, validation and performance of the tests and accurate reporting of results within reasonable turn-around times, is not easy. At any one time there is a finite capacity of testing able to be performed and pragmatic prioritisation of testing that impacts turnaround times for some classes of testing may be required.

Governments should also acknowledge that laboratories may need support to allow for redundancy in the system, particularly whilst faced with uncertainty over the required testing capacity as the pandemic unfolds.

In the short term, PCR testing remains particularly important for symptomatic individuals, who, in a low prevalence, highly vaccinated environment, may be more likely to still have COVID-19. There will also be an ongoing need for PCR testing to protect our most vulnerable populations.

SARS-CoV-2 Rapid Antigen Testing (RAT) is likely to have a role in addition to PCR, but implementation of these tests needs to be carefully managed; the College has, and will, continue to give advice on its use.

Australasia is part of a global community. The WHO is concerned with the impact of the low vaccination rate in the poorest parts of the globe, many of which are in our region. The College supports the concern that, "We are not all vaccinated until we are ALL vaccinated".

High quality pathology testing will continue to adapt and innovate in response to all public health and clinical testing needs.

The role of the College is to ensure quality pathology testing, alongside regulatory bodies such as the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) the National Pathology Accreditation Advisory Council (NPAAC) and IANZ. The College's position on COVID-19 testing aligns with scientific bodies and Commonwealth agencies including AHPPC, CDNA, PHLN and the New Zealand Microbiology Network (NZMN). The College will continue to support the Pathology workforce in Australian and New Zealand as it adapts and innovates to support the ongoing COVID-19 response.