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COVID-19: NPG Position on Rapid Point-of-Care Tests for COVID-19

On 25 March the National Pathology Group (NPG), a special interest group of SAMA issued a statement on the usefulness of rapid tests for COVID-19. Largely, the position aligns with the statement issued by the South African Health Products Regulator this week.

In short, the rapid tests are serological tests for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies.

The delayed antibody response may limit the use of rapid tests to diagnose acute infection in conditions such as influenza. Whether this will be the case with COVID-19 is still unknown.

There may well be a risk of serology tests producing false negative results within the early phase of infection.

Antibody tests are in general prone to cross-reactive reactions due to other antibodies circulating, which may well be the case if patients had prior coronavirus infections with common human coronaviruses which circulate in the population.

The specificity of these assays need to be determined prior to use.

All confirmed cases of COVID-19 are currently notifiable, thus rapid test results would currently require confirmation by means of a formal laboratory PCR, whether positive or negative. Use of rapid tests may prove detrimental to managing cases, especially in the case of false negative results, where isolation might be forsaken.

However, there is insufficient evidence and experience with these rapid tests now.

As such the NPG does not currently recommend the use of rapid point-of-care serology tests for the diagnosis of COVID-19, nor does it consider these tests to be appropriate for determining a patient's exposure history or potential immunity to the SARS-2 Coronavirus.

The NPG members intend to evaluate these tests, and will provide further guidance should it be necessary.

npg-covid19-serology-tests-letter

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