

State lab says it can provide all the data needed

● *Capturing information on nationwide screening programme is vital for monitoring trajectory of disease*

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The state laboratory says it is collecting all the data that scientists need to monitor the Covid-19 epidemic effectively, dispelling claims made in weekend media reports to the contrary.

At issue is the extent to which the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) is capturing information on the nationwide community screening programme currently under way, as it is vital for monitoring the trajectory of the disease.

As of Sunday, SA had 3,100 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and more than 50 deaths. The outbreak began here in early March with imported cases. But since the closure of its borders and the introduction of quarantine requirements for anyone arriving from an affected country, the epidemic has shifted to one of community transmission.

Tracking the extent of community transmission is vital for gauging the effects of SA's lockdown – one of the most stringent in the world – and helping the government decide how and when to lift some of the restrictions on trade, travel and social interaction, according to the government's chief scientific adviser on Covid-19, Prof Salim Abdool Karim.

Until now, details about which cases were of people who had self-referred and which had been identified during community screening, were not routinely reported by the NHLS.

But since the information is required on the forms that are filled out to request tests, it can easily be extracted, said Kamy Chetty, CEO of the NHLS.

The NHLS has sent regular reminders to health-care personnel about the importance of filling in all the details on the

forms, she said. The NHLS aims to provide up to 36,000 tests a day by the end of April. It is currently meeting demand for testing, and doing about 12,000 tests a week, Chetty said at the weekend.

A key aspect of expanding tests will be the rollout of rapid Cepheid tests that can be run on its GeneXpert machines in mobile units.

Chetty said the first batch of 10,000 kits has arrived in SA, and a further 20,000 are expected this week.

The tests will be run at 183 sites, she said. The NHLS has further testing capacity at provincial laboratories.

Testing will become an increasingly important aspect of the government's response to Covid-19 for at least the next year, said the Wits chair of social security systems administration and management studies, Alex van den Heever.



Testing time: A health worker performs a swab test for Covid-19 on another health worker at the screening tents set up at the Charlotte Maxeke Hospital in Johannesburg. /AFP

He and a team of experts have proposed a "risk-adjusted" approach to managing Covid-19, entailing targeted management of lockdown restrictions linked to mass testing and contact

tracing. Testing on a mass scale would cost R5bn a year if 17,000 people were tested per day, rising to R20bn if 100,000 tests were done daily.

"We lose around R13bn per

day of lockdown. So testing is clearly the cheaper route, provided it is done at a sufficient scale to contain the epidemic," Van den Heever said.

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