Flaws in the UK Covid-19 testing system

POLICY BRIEF SEPETMBER 2020

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing spread of SARS-CoV-2, as well as the risk of future pandemics, make it imperative for countries to learn from one another, particularly around the organisation of testing systems. Results from a study of the national testing systems in six countries (hereafter referred to as 'the study countries.') reveals flaws in UK Coronavirus testing compared with other countries. The analysis uses the framework outlined by the UK's Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies - Find, Test, Trace, Isolate, Support ('FTTIS') - which presents five key components of a 'test and trace' system that is equipped to effectively control the spread of SARS-CoV-2. Study countries include Ireland, Germany, South Africa, South Korea Spain, and the UK.

Findings show considerable variation in FTTIS systems across countries, and suggest three lessons for control of SARS-CoV-2:

1. As no country has a fully optimised system, all study countries can benefit from sharing lessons.
2. For most countries, key areas of focus should be on maintaining isolation and quarantine of individuals and providing support measures to ensure adherence to guidelines and wellbeing.
3. A full FTTIS system requires an additional evaluation component to enable learning, to address the changing challenges of Covid-19 response and share best practice internationally.

FIND

Two parallel strategies need to be considered for a comprehensive FTTIS system. A passive strategy first ensures that those coming forward with Covid-19 symptoms can access diagnostic tests and have their contacts traced. However, the majority of those infected with SARS-CoV-2 will not display symptoms, or may infect others before symptoms develop. Therefore, an active strategy is also needed to hunt for asymptomatic individuals in carefully identified high-risk populations to reduce opportunities for SARS-CoV-2 to spread. Lack of medical oversight and test capacity hampers the effectiveness of these strategies in the UK.

Key findings

UK lessons

- Of the study countries, the UK has the highest proven test capacity with 12,985 tests recorded per week per million capita in July (and rising). However, this capacity is not being used efficiently.
- Coronavirus testing in the community in the UK is being delivered outside of the usual NHS structures, with access to testing and sample collection undertaken without the high levels of medical supervision seen in other countries.
- Unlike other studied countries, testing in the UK has been undertaken outside accredited laboratories with experience of clinical testing for infectious diseases, raising quality concerns.
- In the UK there appears to be no systematic follow-up of isolating or quarantining individuals, except for travellers returning from designated countries. This is against World Health Organisation (WHO) advice.
- Low levels of sick pay may not be enough to prevent the financially insecure from continuing to work, even when unwell. The daily maximum levels of sick pay for isolating employees in Germany are equivalent to the UK's weekly rate.

General lessons

- **Find**: Combining active and passive case-finding approaches, identifying high-risk groups and using effective, tailored communication strategies are all imperative.
- **Test**: The accuracy, utility, and reliability of tests depends on the procedures used for sample collection, handling, and processing. Leveraging existing laboratory networks enables rapid scale up of quality-assured tests.
- **Trace**: Centralised, decentralised and digital contact tracing may be complementary, with careful consideration of how data can be shared across the FTTIS systems while protecting privacy.
- **Isolate**: FTTIS systems should include some form of monitoring of individuals in isolation and quarantine to promote adherence to guidelines and wellbeing.
- **Support**: Offering practical, financial, and material support to individuals in isolation and quarantine promotes adherence and wellbeing.
- These components are interrelated and rely upon one another.
- Openness and evaluation are integral to the FTTIS system, to support continual assessment, learning, evolution and international sharing of good practice