



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

An Oifig Ceannasaí Náisiúnta Tástála agus Rianaithe,
Foireann Bainistíocht Feidhmiúcháin, Ospidéal an Dr. Steevens, Baile Átha Cliath 8,

National Lead Testing and Tracing Office, HSE
Dr Steevens' Hospital, Steevens' Lane, Dublin 8, D08 W2A8

27th November 2020

Deputy Róisín Shortall
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Re: PQ 33911/20 Question: “To ask the Minister for Health if the sensitivity of the PCR test for Covid-19 used in Ireland differs from that used in other jurisdictions; if his Department has considered emerging evidence that a PCR test could identify trace amounts of the virus from a past infection whereby the person would no longer be infectious; the way in which his Department will address this in policy; the way in which the sensitivity of the PCR test compares to other types of tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter”.

Dear Deputy Shortall,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question which has been referred by the Minister for Health to the Health Service Executive for direct response.

I wish to apologise for the delay in issuing a response to your above question.

Due to the current demands of the Covid-19 pandemic and the numerous queries we have received to date it has taken longer than I would've liked to respond.

Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) is a technique for amplifying DNA (and indirectly RNA). A thermostable (not damaged by heat) polymerase enzyme drives the PCR. This polymerase enzyme will synthesise/make a complementary sequence to any single strand of DNA if we provide the raw materials and the correct temperature for it to do so. The sensitivity of the PCR test depends on the assay being used. As Ireland is using PCR tests manufactured by large multinational companies and sold on the global markets, there is no reason to believe the sensitivity of the tests used in Ireland is any different to other jurisdictions.

It is not that there is new emerging evidence in relation to the PCR test. It is a feature of the PCR test that means the clinical context of the test must also be taken into account. Just because an individual is no longer infectious, it does not negate the fact that they were infectious at some point. In Ireland, we test individuals with symptoms of SARS CoV 2 infection; we test close contacts of confirmed cases; we test individuals associated with outbreaks; and we test in at-risk settings e.g. residential care facilities. In all of these settings, it is beneficial to know if people were infected with SARS CoV 2, as this facilitates retrospective/enhanced contact tracing.

PCR is the most accurate, most sensitive, and most specific test we have. The WHO identified PCR testing as the gold standard against which all other tests are compared. It is the recommended test for Covid-19 by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

I trust this addresses your question.

Yours sincerely,

Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead for Testing and Tracing



Seirbhís Sláinte
Níos Fearr
á Forbairt

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