

Coronavirus

Govts toughen fight

FDA okays COVID test for pooled sample use

WASHINGTON, July 20, (AP): The Food and Drug Administration has given emergency approval to a new approach to coronavirus testing that combines test samples in batches instead of running them one by one, speeding up the process.

The FDA said Saturday that it reissued an emergency use authorization to Quest Diagnostics to use its COVID-19 test with pooled samples. It is the first test to be authorized to be used in this way.

With pooling, instead of running each person's test individually, laboratories would combine parts of samples from several people and test them together. A negative result would clear everyone in the batch. A positive result would require each sample to be individually retested. Pooling works best with lab-run tests, which take hours — not the much quicker individual tests used in clinics or doctor's offices.

The potential benefits of sample pooling include stretching laboratory supplies further, reducing costs and expanding testing to millions more Americans who may unknowingly be spreading the virus. Health officials think infected people who aren't showing symptoms are largely responsible for the rising number of cases in more than half the country. The approach might enable mass testing at schools or businesses, though it's unclear when that could happen.

"It's a really good tool. It can be used in any of a number of circumstances, including at the community level or even in schools," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, told a Senate hearing last month.

Pooling is not always the best option. It won't save time or resources when used in a COVID-19 hot spot such as a nursing home outbreak. That's because the logistical and financial benefits of pooling only add up when a small number of pools test positive.

Experts generally recommend the technique when fewer than 10% of people are expected to test positive. For example, pooling would not be cost-effective in Arizona, where a surge has pushed positive test results to well over 10%. But the approach could make sense in areas with a lower rate of positive results.



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Reassessing

Meanwhile, signs of governments reassessing their coronavirus response were scattered around the world Sunday, with the mayor of Los Angeles saying the city was reopened too quickly, Ohio's governor warning his state is "going the wrong way," Hong Kong issuing tougher new rules on wearing face masks and Spain closing overcrowded beaches.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said Los Angeles was "on the brink" of new widespread stay-at-home orders as Los Angeles County continued to see the state's largest increase in confirmed coronavirus cases. California reported on Saturday its fourth-highest daily total of newly confirmed coronavirus cases, with more than 9,000.

Appearing on CNN Sunday, Garcetti was asked about a Los Angeles Times editorial that criticized the rapid reopening of California, which was followed by a spike in new COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.

"I do agree those things happened too quickly," Garcetti said, adding that the decisions were made at the state and county levels, not by city officials. But he also said people in general had become less vigilant about taking precautions to avoid transmission.

"It's not just what's open and closed," he said. "It's also about what we do individually."

Infections have been soaring in US states including California, Florida, Texas and Arizona, with many blaming a haphazard, partisan approach to lifting lockdowns as well as the resistance of some Americans to wearing masks.

In Florida, where health officials reported nearly 12,500 new infections and nearly 90 additional deaths on Sunday, US Sen Marco Rubio called for consistent, nonpartisan messaging.

"We've seen a lot of these things turned into sort of a partisan fight or a political statement," he told South Florida television station, CBS4, on Sunday.

Ohio Gov Mike DeWine, like Rubio a Republican, said he would not rule out a statewide mandate on wearing masks, as infections in his state grew. He has already issued such orders in 19 counties accounting for nearly 60% of the state's population.

"We're going the wrong way. We're at a crucial time," DeWine said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

Globally, the World Health Organization said that 259,848 new infections were reported Saturday, its highest one-day tally yet. India, which has now confirmed more than 1 million infections, on Sunday reported a 24-hour record of 38,902 new cases.

Pope Francis said "the pandemic is showing no sign of stopping" and urged compassion for those whose suffering during the outbreak has been worsened by conflicts.

Outbreaks

In Europe, where infections are far below their peak but local outbreaks are causing concern, leaders of the 27-nation European Union haggled for a third day in Brussels over a proposed 1.85 trillion-euro (\$2.1 trillion) EU budget and coronavirus recovery fund.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said there is "a lot of good will, but there are also a lot of positions" in the talks, which have laid bare divisions about how the countries hit hardest by the pandemic, such as Italy and Spain, should be helped. She said the talks, which were initially scheduled to end on Saturday, could still end without a deal.

Confirmed global virus deaths have risen to more than 603,000, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. The United States tops the list with over 140,000, followed by more than 78,000 in Brazil. Europe as a continent has seen about 200,000 deaths.

The number of confirmed infections worldwide has passed 14.3 million, with 3.7 million in the United States and more than 2 million in Brazil. Experts believe the pandemic's true toll around the world is much higher because of testing shortages and data collection issues.

Even where the situation has been largely brought under control, new outbreaks are prompting the return of restrictions.

Following a recent surge in cases, Hong Kong made the wearing of masks mandatory in all public places and told non-essential civil servants to work from home. Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said the situation in the Asian financial hub is "really critical" and that she sees "no sign" that it's under control. Police in Barcelona have limited access to some of the city's beloved beaches because sunbathers were ignoring social distancing regulations amid a resurgence of coronavirus infections.

Slaughterhouses also have featured in outbreaks in the US, Germany and elsewhere. Authorities in northwestern Germany's Vechta county said 66 workers at a chicken slaughterhouse tested positive, though most appeared to have been infected in their free time. An earlier outbreak at a slaughterhouse in western Germany infected over 1,400 and prompted a partial lockdown.

Cases in the Australian state of Victoria rose again Sunday, prompting a move to make masks mandatory in metropolitan Melbourne and the nearby district of Mitchell for people who leave their homes for exercise or to purchase essential goods.

Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews said those who fail to wear a mask will be fined 200 Australian dollars (\$140).

"There's no vaccine to this wildly infectious virus and it's a simple thing, but it's about changing habits, it's about becoming a simple part of your routine," Andrews said.



Mohammad Amin is helped by his son in the Intensive Care Unit ward for COVID-19 patients at the Afghan-Japan Communicable Disease Hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan on June 30, 2020. (AP)

Coronavirus

Afghanistan's health care system risks collapsing

Families step in to care for patients

KABUL, Afghanistan, July 20, (AP): The intensive care unit at the Afghan capital's premier hospital for COVID-19 patients is a medical nightmare — and a stark warning how the country's war-ravaged health care system risks collapsing.

Family members, without protective equipment and only a few wearing face masks, help care for the patients lying in hospital beds. They say they have no choice because there are not enough nurses and other medical staff.

The next-of-kin often guard their loved one's oxygen tank, fearing it could be stolen because there is a shortage of just about everything, including oxygen cylinders.

The 100-bed Afghan-Japan Communicable Disease Hospital in western Kabul is one of only two facilities for coronavirus testing and treatment in the Afghan capital. Newly graduated Afghan doctors have joined the 370-member staff after many of the hospital's experienced physicians walked out a few months ago, fearing the virus.

The 92-square-meter (1,000-square-foot) ICU ward has only 13 beds, and COVID-19 patients admitted here are in critical condition; few are hooked up to ventilators, some of the others rely on oxygen tanks.

Assadullah, who like many Afghans goes by only one name, says he struggled to stay awake night after night at the ICU ward, guarding the tank that kept his father alive. In his father's final days, the relative of another patient came over, threatening to take the tank.

"Your father is dying but mine is alive, he told me ... in such a situation, how could I have left my father alone," said Assadullah, who lost his father to the virus on Tuesday.

Abdul Rahman, 42, feels the same

way and rushes to rub his 70-year-old mother's back every time she coughs.

A few beds away, 64-year-old Mohammad Amin's left foot has turned black from gangrene that set in after a blood clot due to the virus. His son and wife tend to him as best they can, but they say it's exhausting.

For the hospital's director, Hakimullah Saleh, every staffer is a hero, risking their own life to provide critical care. They face so many work challenges, he said, on top of which they sometimes have to deal with "threats" from distraught families who feel the hospital is not doing enough.

One of Saleh's heroes, Dr Jawad Norzai, is relentless in his devotion to the patients, he said. Along with his job as chief surgeon, Norzai visits over 60 patients a day and finds the time to train new doctors, Saleh said.

Recovered

The 32-year-old Norzai got his medical diploma in 2013 and worked first for private hospitals, joining the Afghan-Japan only after hearing how many of the staff had left. Norzai said he, like many medical professionals, contracted the virus but recovered. He said he infected several of his family members but luckily, they also recovered.

Another one of the Afghan-Japan doctors who recovered from the virus is Mozghan Nazeah, 35. "I spent three nights awake because of severe pain, back pain, and lower limb pain, that pain I will never forget," said Nazeah, who lives apart from her family to keep them safe.

The other hospital that treats COVID-19 patients is the Ali Jenah, funded by Pakistan, a 200-bed but less-equipped facility, also in western Kabul. There is also an isolation center in the dormitory of the Kabul Univer-

sity, but it does not provide treatment.

According to the Health Ministry, more than 1,700 medical workers — including 40 at the Afghan-Japan hospital — were infected while providing care to COVID-19 patients; 26 have died.

Afghanistan has so far recorded almost 35,000 cases of the virus, including 1,094 deaths, with the number of infections thought to far outnumber the official tally.

The International Rescue Committee warned last month that Afghanistan is on the brink of a humanitarian disaster because the government is unable to test some 80% of possible coronavirus cases.

The Health Ministry said it now has the capacity to test only 2,500 people per day. Last month, 10,000 to 20,000 people were coming daily, asking to be tested, but the government had to turn many down. Afghanistan has one doctor for every 3,500 people, less than a fifth of the global average, according to the World Health Organization.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said on Tuesday that in addition to the COVID-19 health crisis faced in Afghanistan, the socioeconomic impact of the virus could become catastrophic with 12.4 million people — one third of the country's population — already considered to be living at "emergency" levels of food shortages.

Seemingly indicative of the fractured health care system, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's special envoy for economic development, Yusuf Ghaznafar, went to Turkey when he became ill with COVID-19. He died of the disease there in early July, according to a statement from the presidency — the most senior Afghan official so far to die of the virus.

new confirmed cases with the virus during the past 24 hours have reached 5,940 while the total number of infections reached 777,486.

The statement added that 3,258 individuals recovered from the virus in the past 24 hours, putting the total at 553,602. (KUNA)

26 cases in S. Korea: South Korea reported 26 more cases of the new coronavirus Monday, raising the country's total caseload to 13,771, according to Yonhap News Agency.

The country reported one additional death, bringing the death toll to 296, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. Of the new infections, 22

were imported cases, posting double-digit numbers for 25 consecutive days.

South Korea has recorded a sharp increase in the number of imported cases, mostly attributable to workers returning from Iraq and a series of cluster infections on Russian-flagged vessels docked in the country's southeastern port city of Busan.

The country has been struggling to curb such infections detected at border checkpoints, requesting arrivals from six high-risk nations to submit proof of negative virus test results. (KUNA)

22 cases in China: The Chinese authorities announced Monday that 22 coronavirus

infection cases were recorded during the past 24 hours, including 17 local cases, but no deaths recorded.

This brings the total number of infections on the Chinese mainland to 83,682 people, and the total number of deaths to 4,634 people, according to the Xinhua news agency, quoting the National Health Commission (NHC).

It added that the new 17 cases are all from "Xingjian" Uygur Autonomous Region, while no cases had been registered in the capital city of Beijing, for the 14th consecutive day, nor had any cases been recorded in (Hubei) Province and its capital Wuhan, the epicenter of the virus.

Xinhua said that five infections have been recorded from travelers coming to China, three from Shwan, and, one from Shandong, and one case from Mongolia, bringing the number of infections coming from outside the mainland to 2,012.

It explained that 24 people have left the hospitals during the past 24 hours after their recovery, bringing the total number of people who have recovered until to 78,799, while 249 people are still receiving treatment. (KUNA)

27 deaths in UK: UK The British health authorities confirmed Sunday 27 deaths due to the novel coronavirus, taking the tally to 45,300.

In a statement, the Department of Health and Social Care affirmed that 726 people tested positive for the virus, to take the total number of infections to 294,792. (KUNA)

24 cases in Greece: Greece, on Sunday, affirmed 24 new COVID-19 infections, bringing the total to 4,007, while death toll settled at 194.

As many as 16 of the new cases are related to people who recently arrived from abroad. Athens News Agency reported, citing figures of the health authorities. (KUNA)



Women wear masks to curb the spread of the new coronavirus exercise along Boyaca Avenue in Caracas, Venezuela on July 19. (AP)



Merkel

Wieler

Health

2 deaths in Germany: Germany announced on Monday that Coronavirus (COVID-19) claimed two deaths, while infections reached 249 cases in the past 24 hours.

Head of Robert Koch public health institute (PKI) Dr Lothar Wieler added in a press release that Covid-19 death toll climbed to 9,086, while total infections reached 201,823.

The pandemic map in Germany is in the green zone currently, he said, indicating that all districts and areas all over the country's 16 States are out of the danger zone, registering 50 cases for every 100,000 citizens.

The Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel has agreed with the presidents of local governments to restore isolation and closure if numbers were beyond the green zone, a matter that only happened in Gutersloh district, west of the country, three weeks ago. (KUNA)

361 cases in Japan: Japan reported 361 new cases of the coronavirus over the last 24 hours as of 4:00 p.m. (0700 GMT) on Monday, bringing the nation's total number to 25,644, the health ministry and local authorities said.

The country's death toll remained unchanged at 986. Tokyo confirmed 168 new infections, staying below 200 for the second straight day, which brought the total cases in the Japanese capital to 9,579.

Since the country fully lifted a nationwide state of emergency late May, the number of daily new cases in Tokyo has been on an upward trend, including group infections in nightlife spots, workplaces and theaters.

The Tokyo metropolitan government last week raised its coronavirus alert level to the highest on a four-tier scale, which means the infections appear to be spreading.

It urged residents to refrain from visiting nightlife spots that do not take appropriate anti-infection measures, and making nonessential travel to other prefectures. The tallies exclude those who were linked to the virus-hit Diamond Princess cruise ship in February. (KUNA)

85 deaths in Russia: Russian authorities on Monday reported 85 death cases due to the new Coronavirus (COVID-19), bringing the country's total death toll to 12,426.

In a statement, health ministry said that



A health worker gives a polio vaccine to a child in Karachi, Pakistan on July 20. Pakistan resumed vaccinations against polio on Monday, months after the drive against this crippling children's disease was halted because the novel coronavirus had overwhelmed the country's health system. The anti-polio campaign would last five days from Monday with the plan to have about 800,000 children vaccinated, the officials said. (AP)