Government of Newfoundland and Labrador
Department of Health and Community Services
Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health

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TO: Physicians and Nurse Practitioners

FROM: Dr. Janice Fitzgerald, Chief Medical Officer of Health

DATE: February 18, 2021

SUBJECT: Rapid Testing Results for COVID-19

The Abbott Panbio COVID-19 test is a rapid antigen test intended for the qualitative detection of SARS-CoV-2 antigen. It requires no platform and results are ready in 20 minutes. It is a lateral flow device much like a pregnancy test. The manufacturers insert lists a sensitivity of 93.3% and specificity of 99.4% using the nasopharyngeal swab in a symptomatic individual within the first seven days of symptom onset.

The use of rapid antigen tests has both limitations and benefits. It is recognized that the antigen test does not perform as well as the Real Time PCR (RT-PCR) test, which is favored for use in the diagnosis of COVID-19. The Abbott Panbio COVID-19 Antigen Rapid Test has a lower sensitivity when compared with the RT-PCR test, which is used at the provincial Public Health Microbiology Lab (PHML). Decreased sensitivity raises the risk of a false negative result, which could lead to missing a case. A negative Panbio test does not exclude SARS-CoV-2 infection and therefore cannot be used as the sole basis for treatment or other management decisions. In a community with low prevalence, false positives can also become an issue that can lead to patient stress, and increased and unnecessary workload. Confirmatory testing is usually performed with RT-PCR at the PHML. Clients can access their RT-PCR test result online if they have a Medical Care Plan (MCP) card.

Rapid antigen testing can help to rapidly inform public health action in order to interrupt chains of transmission of COVID-19. Testing of individuals with a rapid antigen test can identify a presumptive positive case of COVID-19 quickly. The rapid results support Public Health to promptly investigate the case, assess risk, and manage contacts. The ease of use and ability to test large numbers of people also make the use of rapid tests a good option in appropriate circumstances. The use of rapid testing can allow Public Health investigators to get a quick “snapshot” of the level of transmission within a defined area or group of individuals so that they can implement Public Health measures to interrupt transmission if necessary.

Rapid COVID-19 testing is currently underway in some areas of the province using the Panbio COVID-19 rapid antigen test. The Panbio results are considered presumptive only. Current presumptive positives are being treated as cases by Public Health. A presumptive negative test only represents a point in time. In addition, due to the Panbio test limitations regarding false negatives, a presumptive negative can only be interpreted as the individual is “probably negative for now.” Anyone with new or worsening symptoms after any negative test – whether rapid or RT-PCR – should complete the COVID-19 Self-Assessment and Referral online at https://covidassessment.nlchi.nl.ca/. As health care providers, you will be able to see the patient’s Panbio test result. Please advise patients that they must follow quarantine and self-isolation directions given by Public Health.