

(Te Marae Ora/Cook Islands Ministry of Health, n.d.)

Media Release

Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) Laboratory Update

The setup of a specialist laboratory, PCR lab that will significantly improve Cook Islands' COVID-19 testing capabilities is a step closer with the arrival of the remaining equipment last week.

The reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test is the gold standard for COVID-19 testing worldwide.

Effective PCR testing requires a dedicated laboratory fit out with specialised equipment and supplies, which had to be sourced and delivered from Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand. Shipping delays have pushed out the commissioning date several times.

Although Te Marae Ora has had the ability to test for COVID-19 in-country since May 2020, the ministry has been working towards setting up a PCR lab for several months now.

"Having our own PCR laboratory will significantly lift our testing capability and capacity for COVID-19, and other diseases" says Health Secretary Bob Williams.

Currently, in-country COVID-19 tests are conducted using a cartridge-based GeneXpert machine.

Alternatively, DNA specimens collected via throat or nasal swab are sent to New Zealand for testing, a process which usually takes about a week and costs approximately \$100 per test.

Having our own PCR lab will provide the Cook Islands with a more cost-effective and timely means of testing for COVID-19. Budgeted at \$900,000 – including a laboratory information software system – LIMS the dedicated lab will enable Te Marae Ora to conduct up to 400 tests per day if required.

Hospital staff working with the new equipment will require further training in its use. A specialist trainer arrives in Rarotonga in the first week of April and will be here for 2 weeks.

When complete the PCR lab will complement earlier investments in infrastructure aimed at supporting the Cook Islands' ability to respond to any potential cases of COVID-19.

The PCR lab is expected to be up and running by mid-April.

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