

SUBJECT: Changes to COVID PCR Testing From 01 July 2023

To: All Staff ACT Pathology, Canberra Health Services

CC: Community and Public Sector Union
Health Services Union
Professionals Australia
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From: Glenn Edwards, Executive Director, ACT Pathology, Canberra Health Services

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ACT Pathology, particularly the Molecular laboratory team, has played a vital role in the ACT's response to the COVID pandemic.

The pandemic emergency was unprecedented. It placed a significant strain on laboratory services and suppliers globally. ACT Pathology rapidly converted to a 24x7 operation, and significantly expanded our suite of equipment to support the dramatic surges in testing activity.

This response was supported by a temporary expansion of our laboratory team. Through an accelerated consultation, which included our industrial partners, we created several new temporary roles and shifts across the 24x7 roster arrangement to see us through the peak of the pandemic. I am immensely grateful to all team members and stakeholders who worked together under significant pressure to provide exceptional care to the community.

As you are aware, the current environment in which we now operate is significantly different to where we were at our peak. For example:

- Overall, PCR testing numbers remain at very low levels.
- The ACT Government's emergency powers are no longer in place.
- The Garran Surge Centre was closed on 28 February 2023, and community testing has been moved to existing pathology outpatient services.
- The eligibility requirements for PCR and RAT testing and reporting have fundamentally changed.

While COVID has not gone away, it is now clear that the community's expectations for health services, including Pathology, are returning to 'business as usual'.

Consequently, the conditions that required us to stand up a 24x7 PCR testing service no longer exist, and therefore the requirement for the agreed temporary expansion of operating hours and increase in staff positions is not necessary.

Following discussion with clinicians, pathologists and laboratory teams, ACT Pathology is now planning for the return to our 'business as usual' model for COVID PCR testing. These changes are summarised below.

Of course, we need to ensure that we are able to respond to new testing surges should they occur. We will continue to provide a rapid PCR service especially to the CHS Emergency Department and hospital inpatients. This is reflected in some of the additional contingencies (e.g., new temporary on-call arrangements) listed below, which provide some capacity above our pre-pandemic levels. Of note, the GeneXpert will continue to support the rapid response testing for the Canberra Hospital Emergency Department and hospital patients where required. Note that a GeneXpert device, based in the Calvary laboratory and operated by the Calvary laboratory team, has been supporting the Calvary public hospital throughout the pandemic.

Summary of changes to COVID testing services:

- Temporary laboratory positions will not be extended past 30 June 2023.
- The Molecular laboratory will revert to business as usual (BAU) pre-Covid with operational hours of Monday to Friday between 07:30 and 17:51.
- The Molecular laboratory will continue to perform routine and urgent COVID testing during operational hours.
- Outside operational hours (Monday – Friday between 17:51 and 07:30, Saturday, Sunday and public holidays), Molecular scientists will be on-call to respond where required, e.g., outbreaks.
- The 4 Channel GeneXpert device located in the Diagnostic Genomics laboratory will be relocated to the Specimen Reception area (SRA) on Level 2
- Outside operational hours (Monday – Friday between 17:51 and 07:30, Saturday, Sunday and public holidays), urgent COVID PCR referrals will be processed by technical officers in SRA on the GeneXpert. The SRA technical officer performing GeneXpert testing will be supported by scientists from the Chemical Pathology laboratory.

- Urgent cerebral spinal fluid microscopy will be performed by the Haematology laboratory. This will follow strict criteria for testing and will be supported by on-call microbiology scientists where required.
- An additional 6-month temporary HP2 position has been created to support the laboratory over the winter season, an arrangement that existed pre-pandemic. This position will be advertised shortly.
- The current roster (24x7) will remain in place until 30 June 2023.

These changes will take effect from 01 July 2023. We will continue to monitor the situation, particularly regarding winter flu season, and respond if necessary.



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