Labs ramp up operations to cope with surge in cases

They are hiring more staff, using technology to process samples faster and more accurately.

Coronavirus Singapore

Jessie Lim

Laboratories in Singapore have ramped up operations to cope with the surge in Covid-19 cases, which number in the thousands daily.

Medical technology firm Acumen Diagnostics told The Sunday Times it opened a second lab in Science Park Road this month, doubling its capacity to process polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests from 3,000 to 7,000 daily.

Its staff strength, including lab staff and senior managers, has also doubled from 40 to 80.

Dr Ong Siew Hwa, its chief executive and chief scientist, said: "We have expanded our lab’s physical space, added automation and grown our team, including our in-house logistics team that brings the samples back from test sites islandwide."

‘People need to know if they can return to school to sit an exam, or board that flight.’

Half of the samples it receives are from migrant worker dormitories, while the rest are from regional screening centres, hawkers and Send Home clinics and special testing operations.

Noting how there is no room for any delays and mistakes especially when handling swabs for Covid-19 clusters, Dr Ong said: "When the hawkers centres or markets are involved, these people are waiting to know if they can go back to open their stalls."


In most labs, viral RNA from the samples is extracted and converted to DNA in a method known as reverse transcription. This genetic material is then processed within a PCR machine, which will amplify the DNA so lab technicians can identify whether they have found Sars-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19.

While self-administered antigen rapid tests (ART) will take only 20 minutes to complete, the turnaround time for a PCR test is usually within 24 to 48 hours.

The Health Promotion Board told The Sunday Times that, since May, to meet the increased demand for testing operations, it has hired and trained 200 additional swabbers, and another 600 swabs assistants and support staff have joined, this brings its total strength to 2,600 operational staff.

Labs here beef up ops

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Systems design engineer Melvin Ng from Pathnova Laboratories @ LKCMedicine loading samples into a machine for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing last week. PCR tests look for genetic sequences specific to Covid-19, and the turnaround time for such tests is usually within 24 to 48 hours. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN