

2020.03.24

2 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the rate of testing for Coronavirus: (OQ.91/2020)

Will the Minister authorise a significant increase in the rate of testing for coronavirus in the Island along the lines of the World Health Organization recommendations, in order to limit the spread of the virus; and if not, why not?

Deputy R.J. Renouf of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

As I have said in my response to the Written Question today from Deputy Higgins, my Department is keen to conduct its own testing here as soon as possible and we are actively pursuing a range of options to do this. We placed an order for testing kits, which will be compatible with the technology already in place in our laboratory and we hope to see this order fulfilled in the next 2 to 4 weeks. The number of tests that can be processed from Jersey is limited, but this has been guaranteed and assured by colleagues from Public Health England and the Ministry of Justice. We need to recognise that testing labs in the U.K. are under great pressure at this time. But testing is a key element of our strategy, as we have heard this morning from Dr. Muscat and we will continue to escalate testing as we work to contain the virus through social distancing, self-isolation and contact tracing. This will help to delay the impact of COVID-19 on our healthcare system and shield our community from the worst-case scenario. Who to test is ultimately a clinical decision and I support the criteria recommended by Dr. Muscat.

3.2.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister inform us what role contact tracing plays in our overall response?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The effort has to be to try and ensure that the virus is not spread. If we know that there is a confirmed case, it makes good sense to go to those with whom the person has had the most contact and test those people. Then to advise them, if they are positive, to self-isolate.

3.2.2 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

I just wanted to press the Minister on that timeframe, because it was slightly different to what we heard in the previous meeting. Is it one to 2 weeks that the testing kit will be on the Island, or is it 2 to 4 weeks? If the Minister is not certain, how likely is it that it will be towards the longer end of the scale of 4 weeks and how likely is it that it will be one week? Once it is here, is the testing kit immediately usable, or is there another wait then until it is able to be used?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Answering the latter question first. My understanding is it is going to be immediately usable, because it is compatible with equipment that we have here in our path lab. As to the time period, I would love to have a date. The answer I have been given here, after seeking that information, was the next 2 to 4 weeks. I know Dr. Muscat is speaking to people every day about trying to get this equipment in. So we are constantly monitoring it. But what has happened in the U.K. is that the N.H.S. (National Health Service) has gone to a situation where it is controlling all supplies in the country. It is a planned strategy and it is, for obvious reasons, therefore distributing supplies around the country in a logical way and in a planned way. We are in that supply chain, rest assured and our needs are fully understood. But I am afraid, at the moment, I do not have a specific date to give but I know officers and doctors are on this; all over.

3.2.3 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier:

Given that there is obviously going to be a delay with testing, we have heard about testing and when it can be unsuccessful and give false results, would the Minister consider a change in the message that is going to tell the members of the public and all of us that if we act as if we believe we are carrying the virus at the early stages then social distancing will be much more successful in halting this virus? Would that message not be a useful one to go while we are waiting for more testing?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I entirely take the Deputy's point. It may well be useful. I would like to discuss that messaging with Dr. Muscat, but I think that is the whole purpose of us social distancing, is it not? It is not just to protect ourselves from somebody 2 metres away who may have the virus. It is recognising that we ourselves may be carrying the virus. So we are protecting our loved ones and those you have to come in contact with by keeping that social distancing. I am with the Deputy. I understand that and I will examine how better we can put that out there.

3.2.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can the Minister please get the message across very clearly about the way the testing works? If you do not have the virus in your throat, you cannot test for it in your throat. I think people are getting the wrong picture of how the test works. Can I ask him please to get that message across as well in terms of some accuracy about testing? What we need now are facts and detail. That is the key point I think that is worrying a lot of people.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I will endeavour to do all of that, Deputy. I acknowledge that communication needs to be ramped up, improved, but at the same time, our Comms (Communications) Unit has been working round the clock. This has been an emergency that we have never faced. I do believe there is a lot of information out there, which is good information, but I do understand people's confusion sometimes, fears, doubts and the assurances they need and we want to give them that and we will just endeavour to ramp up our efforts.

3.2.5 Deputy I. Gardiner:

I would like to follow up with the Minister regarding contact tracing. First of all, would the Minister reconfirm that we have robust contact tracing in place and everybody who is within contact with a confirmed coronavirus case have been tested and they are self-isolated for the next 7 to 14 days? I would like to have a clarity for how many days they are self-isolating. Would the Minister consider to have more transparency and basically to tell to the public some of the data, such as how many have been contacted from the community, who arrived on which flight, to have this contact tracing understanding that people can take the actions saying: "I have been there, I would rather to self-isolate." I do not think it will be panicking, in my respect. So would the Minister give me these 2 answers? Thank you.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Exactly who gets tested as a contact is something that is determined clinically by Dr. Muscat's team. I want to leave it to them to determine what is the best use of the limited access we have to testing and the swabs that we use. So, when the Deputy asks does everybody who has had contact with an infected person get tested; I do not think the answer is everybody. I think there is a triage system that is put in place to test those who might be most at risk of passing on the virus. But, yes, I anticipate that we will be able to say for the time being how many cases we think have come into

the Island as a result of travel and how many cases may have been transmitted locally without any travel history. I think, at present, that is 2, I understand, in that latter category. But as time goes on of course, when we have more and more cases arising, it is going to be impossible to determine whether that has come in from outside the Island, because there will be so much transmission within the Island. As to providing statistics to the Islanders; yes, we do want to communicate the model as much as we can, but Members will have seen it is technical, it is scientific, it does need to be carefully interpreted with an understanding. So we must try and get that understanding out there so it might ... how that is done I do not know. It is about careful communication, is it not? Not just putting out the sort of charts you have seen today and expecting people to interpret them on their own. So it has to be done carefully. But I think what we can all do is to get behind the hard work that is being undertaken by the public health team and telling people that we are not responding from our guts, we are responding to scientific modelling and that we have experts working for us who are trying to safeguard and protect this Island and we can trust the work that they are doing. We must also get that message across and I would urge all Members to help with that.

3.2.6 Senator K.L. Moore:

In answer to a previous question about testing, the Minister said it may be a matter of weeks before more testing kits can be in the Island yet just yesterday an offer was made to the Minister from a group of individuals who have worked out a way of bringing equipment into the Island by the weekend, I do believe. Yet nobody has responded yet to that individual. When will the Minister be responding and taking a more proactive stance in these matters?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

It is amazing how many people are contacting me, contacting States Members, contacting the Department with offers of help, with suggestions, with all sorts of ideas, they really have been flooding in and that is wonderful as a community to see and it is great to see people getting engaged and that spirit of goodwill. All of these offers are being heavily assessed.

[11:00]

They have to be, Senator, because we need to know that this will work. We need to know that they are available. So, the one puzzlement in my mind is that if we know that there are huge demands on equipment in the N.H.S., in Europe, around the world, the people who are saying to us: "I can get this to you tomorrow, I can get whatever you need tomorrow" well, how are they doing that? We have to understand how they are doing that. We have got to work out if this is real. But I do believe many of the offers out there are genuinely made and may well be feasible and we are examining them rapidly. I can assure Members we will take up any that appear to be feasible. We know there is private testing being done also. Because of the triaging, we are not in a position where we need to access private testing and private clinics; if that is an issue also.

3.2.7 Senator K.L. Moore:

It is understood that staff and your team, Minister, are really busy and we appreciate that and we are grateful to them for their hard work. Yet, communication is key, reassurance is key and an issue such as this, P.P.E. (personal protective equipment), the protective equipment is vital to keep your health service going. So what level and how are you prioritising your actions in terms of redeploying staff who are available from dental surgeries, for example and getting them into the hospital, so that they can provide that backup and support that your medical teams need?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The hospital has been completely reorganised into different streams, into a COVID stream and into a non-COVID stream, because, of course, people with urgent health issues will continue to come into the hospital. Staff are being redeployed and being retrained. It takes time of course to retrain staff. We have also spoken with professionals across the healthcare sector - which I trust and I have no reason to believe does not include the dentists - and there has been good communication with all those healthcare professionals. They stand ready to help us in differing ways and to carry out different types of work. This is all being brought together.

3.2.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I just want to ask how critical the 2 to 4 week window for getting testing on the ground in Jersey, how critical that period is and what happens if that turns out to be 6 weeks rather than 4? Does that seriously affect our response?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Dr. Muscat is clear, he wants the testing to be done locally. He could get more tests done. He would be able to get a better feel for the spread within the Island. So it is important to get this testing kit here. But we have a means to access testing at the moment. I am not going to say it is critical. We are not in a critical situation. But we want to be and we are doing all we can to be in the situation where we can test locally.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Through the Chair, if I may, part of the Minister's response was to mention the responses to Written Questions. They are supposed to have been circulated. I have not seen the responses to Written Questions. Could someone tell me where they are?

The Bailiff:

I will ask the Greffier to establish whether they have been provided. I believe mine have been provided, but it could be that it has not been circulated to all Members. We now come to question 3. Deputy Morel is marked *excusé* and, in the circumstances, I will ask the Greffier to read the question, the Minister will answer it and other Members can seek supplementals as usual. That enables the maximum amount of information to be provided to Members of the Assembly and indeed to the public more generally.