

McKenna, Neil

From: Kim, Sabrina
Sent: Saturday, April 11, 2020 8:25 PM
To: Stickney, Matt
Subject: FW: TStar exclusive says ON gov received 100k unusable swabs (w mould) from fed gov

Ontario received 100,000 contaminated, unusable swabs for COVID-19 tests

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By Kate Allen

Science and Technology Reporter

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2 min. read

A shipment of more than 100,000 testing swabs arrived in Ontario contaminated and unusable, the Star has learned, illustrating how even as the province strives to expand its COVID-19 lab-testing capacity it is still contending with global supply-chain havoc wrought by the pandemic.

The shipment of much-needed swabs, a critical component of the testing, was the first instalment of a big order procured by the federal government, with hundreds of thousands of more from the contaminated batch on the way. The contamination is believed to be mould.

Without the federal order, the province currently has about 200,000 swabs on hand, enough for seven to 10 days' worth of tests, according to provincial officials. Multiple agencies and departments are actively working on acquiring more.

Ontario rolled out a plan to scale up COVID-19 testing Friday, from current levels of about 4,000 daily — a testing rate Premier Doug Ford slammed as “unacceptable” earlier this week — to over 16,000 by the first week of May, including protocols for who will be prioritized with the expanded capacity.

Ford promised a “vast and robust testing regime” for COVID-19 at a press conference Friday.

“Earlier this week, I told you that we would do better when it comes to testing,” Ford said, adding that everyone who needs a test should get it.

“The first step to winning any battle is knowing your enemy.”

Testing for COVID-19 relies on a specific type of “nasopharyngeal” medical swab that captures cells harbouring the virus in the nose or throat. Before shipments of swabs are deployed to assessment centres, they have to be validated by Public Health Ontario’s laboratory.

Because every jurisdiction battling the pandemic is relying on the same type of swabs to run testing programs, supply chains have jammed in the same way that they have been for medical masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE).

Ontario’s goal of testing 16,000 patients for COVID-19 daily assumes a continued ability to acquire swabs, as well as PPE and reagents, the substances used to extract viral genetic material before it is loaded into testing machines. A shortage of reagents was one factor that contributed to the backlog of tens of thousands of tests in recent weeks, which has since been cleared.

Ontario is not alone in battling swab supply chain challenges. Some U.S. states have reported shortages, and the former commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Scott Gottlieb, tweeted in March that “swabs could be a weak link in broadening testing.”

Gottlieb noted that medical products like swabs that have low profit margins are often the weakest link in supply chains. Because they don’t attract investment capital, production is consolidated in the hands of just a few suppliers.

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