

DOH approves Concepcion's pooled PCR testing; saliva testing in the works

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After pioneering successive coronavirus disease (COVID-19) testing innovations in the country such as the research on Pooled Swab Testing and the ongoing research on Saliva-Based Testing and Pooled Saliva-Based Testing,

Presidential Adviser for Entrepreneurship and Go Negosyo founder Joey Concepcion, thanked the Department of Health led by Secretary Francisco Duque for signing the Interim Guidelines on the Conduct COVID-19 Pooled Testing in the country.

"Now, the most important thing is that testing will be faster, and the capacity will increase. Pool testing is efficient as it would bring the cost to around 750 pesos in the pool of 5, versus 750 for only one individual," Concepcion noted.

On the ground, various LGUs have already benefited from pooled testing since September. These are the cities of Makati, Pasig, Pasay, Quezon and Passi City in Southern Iloilo. These LGUs can testify to the costeffectiveness of pooled testing which has already tested 15,012 individuals as of December 2020.

Makati Mayor Abby Binay said, "Companies and businesses with large workforces can continue securing the health and safety of their employees by signing up for pooled swab tests. This can be done regularly, especially now that the majority of companies have asked their staff to resume working on-site."

For her part Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte said, "We appreciate the continuous support of Project Ark in our battle against COVID-19. This initiative complements our testing efforts as we slowly gear towards revitalizing our economy."

Pooled Swab testing was studied carefully by the Philippine Society of Pathologist Incorporated (PSPI), Research Institute of Tropical Medicine (RITM), and the Philippine Children's Medical Center (PCMC).

sector partners, through Go Negosyo, supported and funded the research.

Together with its partners, Go Negosyo believe that pooled testing is a game-changer as it optimizes the availability of test kits, reduces the workload of laboratory staff, eliminates large groups of negative cases, makes PCR testing more affordable and available, provides LGUs and businesses with a better and clearer direction, and restores confidence in returning to work while sustaining the gains of the initial lockdown. According to the DOH, pooled testing can reduce the cost of screening a large number of individuals for infectious diseases. "Using this procedure, samples from multiple individuals are combined or "pooled" then are tested collectively. Select targeted samples are then tested individually if there is a positive result in the group. Strategic testing along with aggressive contact tracing and isolation is recognized as crucial to an effective COVID-19 response. Incorporating specimen pooling strategies is an opportunity for greater efficiency by accelerating COVID-19 testing. Furthermore, it allows the opportunity for testing and targeting even asymptomatic individuals, as well as checking and monitoring areas in the country with low or decreasing COVID-19 prevalence."

Saliva-based testing

Not stopping on the successes of Pooled Swab Testing, research on the Saliva-Based Testing and Pooled Saliva-Based Testing is still in the works and awaiting approval. Leading the research is Dr. Raymond Lo, Head of the PCMC COVID-19 Testing Laboratory. He noted that salivabased testing is already used in the United States and is a good method to get samples for testing.

This method is also more convenient and ideal as it is painless and no swabbers would be needed to extract samples.

Dr. Lo said this method not only saves time, effort, and money but is cost-effective as it needs fewer PPEs, eliminates the need for swab kits and extraction machines, reduces the chances of infection as it reduces the need for interaction, and saves a lot in terms of materials and manpower.

"With all these announcements, our Filipino people can be assured that we will not be left behind. With the efforts of Sec. Galvez in bringing the vaccine to this country, we will soon see this pandemic disappear," said Concepcion.