

## Flip-flop on test for workers

LETTERS 

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IT is the policy of the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) to be supportive of the government's efforts in improving healthcare in the country. We are pleased with the government's efforts so far in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic in the country.

However, as a national medical body, we feel it is our responsibility in the best interest of the people, our healthcare system and our country that we bring to light any matters of great concern.

Recently, a flip-flop in policies and absence of clear guidelines on the testing of workers before businesses resume operations under the conditional movement control order (MCO) has left employers, employees and even general practitioners in the country confused and frustrated.

Since the announcement on using antibody rapid test kits (RTK) for screening employees was made, employers have been calling clinics to arrange for screening of their workers. However, GPs could not conduct the screening without the necessary guidelines.

It was then reported that the Social Security Organisation (Socso), with whom we have been working closely for many years, would be stopping the use of RTK for the mandatory screening of workers for Covid-19.

The Health Ministry informed us about three weeks ago that Socso would be launching the RTK antibody tests for workers with the participation of GPs. During a meeting with Socso's top management four days ago, we were also told that the screening of workers would be initiated through GP clinics that are on the Socso panel.

We have now been informed that only the RT-PCR (reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction) method will be used. The public must be aware that the results of this method typically take 24 hours to obtain. Depending on the volume of test samples and other logistics, it may take longer.

It must also be noted that RT-PCR test results received after three days will not have any clinical value. Results must be received between 48 and 72 hours after testing. Currently, testing capacity nationwide in the private sector is around 9,000 per day. It must also be noted that the laboratories testing these samples also test other cases besides Covid-19.

Since the Health Ministry has established that RT-PCR is the "gold standard" for Covid-19 detection, it must also be clear on the purpose of the RTK antibody test (still used in some applications). MMA has advised GPs to refrain from performing antibody RTK tests without clear guidelines from the



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Adding further to the confusion was the announcement by the International Trade and Industry Ministry (Miti) on May 8 that companies may resume operations without an approval letter from it and that Covid-19 screening of workers was not mandatory.

The government must also be clear on the screening of foreign workers. MMA supports the government's targeted approach but would like to know which sectors would be targeted and who will be screening them.

We wish to appeal for more clarity and proper guidelines for the smooth implementation of the SOP, as many are in the dark over the next steps to be taken.

We believe this confusion over the testing of workers would not have happened if the announcement was made after receiving the guidelines from the Health Ministry.

The public must also be aware that Covid-19 tests are part of precautionary measures but not a guarantee against infection. Results that are "negative" must not in any way give the impression that the person tested is protected from infection.

People can still be exposed to infection even after testing "negative" if preventive measures are not observed.

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