

Not the SWAT Team but the SWAB Team



Pn Rusmawati Khosim



All it takes is a simple few inches stick with rayon and a sample of mucus. Either 15 minutes to an hour or a day - depending on what kind of test is conducted - you will know if you are COVID-19 positive or blessedly negative.

Millions upon millions, if not billions, of such tests, have been performed worldwide for close to two years now, searching for signs of something so small but has an enormous impact; the presence of which can put you into a tailspin of emotions or induce a sigh of the greatest relief.

Either way, and as uncomfortable as many have complained it to be, the nasopharyngeal swab is the gold standard for identifying COVID-19 infection, and Swab Team itself has conducted 28,259 tests since it was formed in May 2020.

Swab Team Coordinator, **Rusmawati Khosim** explains that the Swab Team was formed due to the increased workload when the government made it compulsory to swab every patient before admission and medical procedures.

“When the first COVID-19 wave hit us early 2020, our doctors were performing the swabs. As things progressed, more and more tests were required, creating the need for a specific action team.”

So, the management sent an initial group of 29 staff for training consisting of 13 doctors, 11 nurses and 5 Medical Assistants with the Makmal Kesihatan Awam Kebangsaan (MKAK) in May 2020, hence the formation of the Swab Team. This team has now expanded to 59 clinical staff via a train the trainer programme and 10 non-clinical staff.

The training covered how to take a swab, handle and label the specimens, and pack them properly in an icebox before going off to the Laboratory Department.

Once the credentials and skills were in, and the team practised, competent and ready-to-go, the doctors handed over this task to them.

At IJN today, this swab team carries out swab tests at drive-thru, Observation & Emergency Department (O&E) and wards. The drive-thru handles most of the tests, and they cover patients who are scheduled for admission and procedures, caregiver and public who had made private bookings with our Wellness Centre.

“Pre-admission patients have to come in for PCR tests three days before the dates of their scheduled admission, and the results are usually available within 24 hours. In the O&E meanwhile, our Medical Assistants will swab the patients, and here we usually use the RTK tests as we need faster results to facilitate emergency treatment,” explains Rusmawati.

The set-up for the drive-thru station requires tables to hold all the necessary paraphernalia and chairs for individual tests instead of driving. The stations are easy enough to find with signboards directing one to the lower ground floor car park.

“The most important equipment in this swab testing process is the PCR machine, and this comes under our laboratory team. As for swabs, it takes only a few minutes and is quite a straightforward procedure. Once we are competent, it was a simple matter of execution.

The only issue we face is that we have to be in full P.P.E. With the drive-thru located in the underground car park, you can imagine that this can be quite challenging.

“Because of the area limitations, each team is on duty only for two hours at a time, and the number of stations we open will depend on the number of patients scheduled for the day. Each station can manage 15 patients per hour, as, for the PCR test, we take both nasal and oral samples.”

As only two people are needed for each station - one to check details and do the labelling, and the other to do the actual swabs - the swab team can work by rotation, making things more manageable.

So what happens if the test turns out positive?

Protocol states that the admission for COVID positive patients will be deferred. However, the patient who requires urgent treatment will be treated with strict SOPs.

This about sums up the role of the swab team. Despite starting and ending with that humble-looking swab stick, the role of the swab team is equally as important as any other role in mitigating this pandemic. As part of the overall management of COVID-19 at IJN, this team is, in fact, one of the first lines of defence in its responsibility of screening patients entering our premises.

Their role in protecting our staff and the other patients of the hospital cannot be understated.

