

Spotlight Interview with HNL Lab Medicine's Ronald Walsh

HNL Lab Medicine (Allentown, PA), which has more than 60 patient service locations throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey, typically generates more than 60 million clinical and anatomic pathology results for about 3 million patients and 12,000 healthcare providers each year. Lehigh Valley Health Network is the majority owner of HNL Lab Medicine. *Laboratory Economics* recently spoke with HNL's Chief Medical Officer Ronald Walsh, MD.



Ronald Walsh, MD

How many Covid-19 PCR tests is HNL doing per day and are you able to meet the demand?

We are currently receiving 2,000 to 3,000 Covid-19 PCR specimens per day on weekdays and about 1,000 to 1,500 per day on the weekend. Given our in-house testing capacity is now approximately 4,000 samples per day, so we are able to meet the current demand.

What are the latest trends you're seeing in Covid-19 positivity rates?

PCR testing demand for symptomatic individuals has been decreasing over the past few weeks. Our positivity rate during the first week of January was approximately 20%. In early February, it had declined to 8%.

Which analyzers do you use?

Early on in the pandemic, we had to diversify to overcome supply chain challenges. This led us to validating multiple testing platforms. We perform Covid-19 PCR testing in two departments at HNL. In molecular, we have a Roche 6800 and an 8800, as well as a Hologic Panther. We're also using our Roche Lifecycler z480 to run a Siemens PCR kit. In microbiology, we have Cepheid, BD MAX, Meridian Biosciences Revogene and Diasorin Simplexa instruments, along with the Biofire respiratory panel that includes Covid. If we were fully supplied, we could perform between 7,000 and 8,000 Covid PCR tests per day.

What is your average turnaround time?

We offer a rapid Covid PCR test option for cases where clinical management will change or help with hospital operations. The turnaround time for this rapid test is one to three hours. For routine in-hospital testing, samples are sent to our core lab, and the goal turnaround time is within 24 hours. For samples coming from the ambulatory setting, the goal turnaround time is within 48 hours from receipt in the lab.

Which supplies still are in short supply?

PCR cards, plastic pipette tips and test kits for certain platforms. Vendors are able to forecast about a month out what we will be receiving.

Is HNL doing pooled sample Covid-19 testing?

We are not offering pooling at present, but we are continuing to evaluate whether pooling makes sense. One essential piece of equipment is a liquid handler system, as this would automate the process. We have purchased this device but the lead time to delivery is still a few months away.

How many antibody tests do you do per day?

Demand is lower than expected, although we can facilitate up to 7,000 antibody tests per day.

Have non-Covid-19 test volumes bounced back?

Yes, our routine testing is back in the mid-90s compared to pre-pandemic levels. The initial drop was about 60%. It took about three months to start coming back up.

What impact has the pandemic had on HNL lab revenues?

There really has been no significant negative impact because our main owner – Lehigh Valley Health Network – has bounced back, so revenues have been stable. We are set to meet our revenue goals for the year. Our fiscal year runs June to July, so we are about halfway through the current fiscal year.

Has the vaccine been made available to lab employees yet?

Yes, all of our employees have been provided the opportunity to be vaccinated. About 55% have received it so far. We are trying to increase the compliance rate and trying to make it more convenient. Vaccination is not required, but we are expecting those numbers to go up.

Is your lab using the rapid antigen Covid-19 test?

To this point, we have not offered it due to the decreased sensitivity, but we are considering a high-throughput rapid antigen test for surveillance testing because we are getting a number of requests from colleges for surveillance testing. We expect to have the Beckman Coulter platform online very soon.

What are your projections for HNL in the coming year?

We'll continue to see a demand for Covid PCR testing for the rest of this year. If the Biden administration's plan of 100 million vaccinations in the first 100 days occurs, plus the natural infection rate, we will reach herd immunity sometime this year, and Covid testing demand will decrease. Overall, we are growing as a lab. Lehigh Valley Health Network is adding more campuses, so we anticipate additional demand for testing.