



JOINT MEDIA RELEASE

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GeneXpert testing cartridges will enable COVID testing in Solomon Islands

Working together with the World Health Organization (WHO), Australia and New Zealand funded the successful procurement and delivery of highly sought after GeneXpert PCR testing cartridges to Solomon Islands. The batch of cartridges arrived yesterday on a special Solomon Airlines cargo flight.

Today (8 May) representatives from WHO and the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions handed over boxes of cartridges to the Ministry for Health and Medical Services at the National Medical Store in Ranadi.

These specialised cartridges, which have been developed specifically for COVID-19, can be used in existing GeneXpert testing machines. Solomon Islands already has ten GeneXpert machines, including in some provinces, which are normally used to detect tuberculosis.

The Ministry of Health is also developing use of the qPCR machine at the National Referral Hospital's molecular laboratory. qPCR testing is a more sensitive and technical method of testing for COVID-19, and will enable a higher volume of samples to be tested.

Australia and New Zealand each contributed about SBD 5 million and the Pacific Community and the Pacific Islands Health Officer's Association have each contributed about SBD 4 million to WHO to procure and deliver the GeneXpert testing equipment across the Pacific through a specialised humanitarian corridor.

WHO representative to Solomon Islands Dr Sevil Huseynova said that until now, many Pacific Island countries, including Solomon Islands, have had no in-country capacity to test for COVID-19, requiring specimens to be shipped internationally. The Pacific Community (SPC) and the WHO have been working with health departments across the region to ensure they are ready to start GeneXpert testing for COVID-19.

“The safe and timely arrival of the GeneXpert cartridges is great news,” she said.

“In-country testing capability is vital for effective COVID-19 management. This includes critical and early detection of the virus that will be essential to preventing widespread transmission. Effective testing is one essential component which the Ministry of Health are focusing on, in addition to improved surveillance systems and clinical management of COVID.”



Australian High Commissioner Dr Lachlan Strahan said the GeneXpert shipment was part of the broader package of COVID-19 support that Australia and other health partners had provided.

“Collaboration has never been more important. COVID-19 is testing all of us and it has been a four-way partnership – Solomon Islands, the WHO, Australia and New Zealand – which has delivered this vital in-country testing capability,” he said.

“While we are working together to combat COVID-19, it is vital that we continue our efforts on other important public health challenges, such as maternal healthcare, malaria, non-communicable diseases and immunisations.”

“While COVID-19 has not yet reached Solomon Islands, the social and economic impacts of the virus are already present,” said New Zealand Deputy High Commissioner Hannah Van Voorthuysen.

“In-country testing is an essential tool for leaders and officials to address this challenge and help protect the community from the virus.”

Permanent Secretary for Health Pauline McNeil thanked development partners for their support in establishing GeneXpert testing capability.

“We are so grateful for the broad range of support received from our development partners. Having different methods of testing capability available will support our comprehensive strategy to manage and monitor a potential COVID-19 outbreak,” she said.

“A great benefit of the GeneXpert testing method is that it will also be possible to undertake COVID-19 testing in some of the provincial laboratories. This will enable timely and responsive action across the country if required. Provincial laboratories in Western Province, Choiseul and Malaita are already well placed to start GeneXpert testing for COVID following appropriate training and some minor works to ensure the safety of the laboratory staff.”

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Officials at the GeneXpert handover ceremony at the National Medical Store, Ranadi



New Zealand Deputy High Commissioner Hannah Van Voorthuysen, Australian High Commissioner Dr Lachlan Strahan, Minister for Health and Medical Services Hon. Dickson Mua and WHO Country Representative, Dr Sevil Huseynova inspect cartridges at the handover ceremony, Ranadi.