

Questions from Spotlight and Daily Maverick to the Chair of the NHLS Board

08 April 2020

This reply must be read in conjunction with the NHLS COVID Implementation report issued on 8 April 2020

1. *Given The NHLS's failure to scale up testing capacity more quickly is a matter of public record, how concerned is the Board about this failure and what steps has the Board taken to address the underlying causes of this failure?*

It is my view that the "public record" you refer to is not correct. There is no failure of the NHLS to scale up testing. Initially the testing for Covid 19 was done by the NICD. When the volume of reference testing started growing and the first positive case was detected, the NICD requested the NHLS to start testing in the NHLS laboratories as from the 6th March. The NHLS had already started capacitating itself from January 2020 through the rapid procurement of new equipment and test kits in the face of global shortages and competition and the fact that many testing kits are only recently available. When the instruction was issued by NICD, the NHLS was immediately able to start testing.

Currently, the NHLS has the capacity and test kits to do 15,000 tests in 24 hours. The number of tests it does is determined by Provincial Departments of Health, who have to screen, trace and refer patients for samples to be taken either by the clinician or by the NHLS. The NHLS cannot generate demand, and in fact would welcome an increase in the number of patients who are referred for testing. Our mobile laboratory strategy was put in place to increase the number of samples taken and tested.

The NHLS has also secured supplies to maintain the 15 000 testing capacity over the next three months and further increase it if required.

2. *How do you respond to the suggestion that there is "board and management" dysfunction at the NHLS?*

There is no Board and management dysfunction at the NHLS. The Board has led a process over the past 3 years to deal with corruption and improve inefficiency and stabilise the finances has put us in a position where we are able to respond at the scale and cost we have done. Management presented a detailed plan and progress report to the Board, and the Board applauded the swift and effective response of management in achieving such progress over a short period of time.

3. *While global shortages of the reagents and testing kits are clearly real and valid problems, there is reason to believe that additional planning and management failures have also contributed to the slow scale-up of the NHLS's COVID-19 testing capacity?*

I need to understand better what the alleged planning and management failures are. You will see in the attached COVID-19 implementation report what has been achieved in the face of the global shortages you refer to and is a matter of public record. All considered, the scale up was rapid and remarkable considering the international competition and shortages of test kits. The NHLS will welcome a scale up in referrals for tests that will match the scale up it has achieved in testing capacity. To this end the NHLS has procured sixty (mobile laboratory) vehicles to act as sampling and testing vehicles, which will provide much needed access to the communities

Have any NHLS staff made the board aware of such additional challenges, and if yes, what actions did the board take in response?

The NHLS management is continuously updating me as Chair and the Board on progress, challenges and steps being taken to mitigate the risks. Issues that have been raised by staff with me or the Board, and after assessment, have been used to enhance our planning and management.

4. *How do you respond to the suggestion that existing NHLS lab capacity, as well as scientific expertise, is being under-utilised due to management problems?*

The NHLS is utilising its laboratory capacity and scientific expertise and all staff have been requested to volunteer to assist in the campaign. Propositions raised by individual staff members that they could be more effectively utilised have been taken up with management. The NHLS is also collaborating with other academic and research laboratories to increase capacity if needed.

5. *Has the board received any complaints regarding the current NHLS CEO's management style and decisions, and if yes, what actions have the board taken in response?*

In January, the Board made it clear to the CEO that she must take responsibility for ensuring that the NHLS response was at the capacity and scale required to match the demands expected from SARS-CoV-2. As the accounting officer and CEO of the NHLS, of which the NICD is an entity, the Board expects her to take charge of the campaign and drive it from her office. An effort of this nature needs a very directive management style. This has put us in the position whereby the NHLS has the capacity to meet the current and future demand for tests referred to it, having procured in a manner consistent with the Public Finance Management Act. Concerns raised by staff members about the management of the COVID-19 programme have been explored and guidance has been given to management.

6. *Given the current NHLS CEO was relatively recently appointed, is she still under probation?*

Executive appointments in the NHLS come with a six-month probation period. The current CEO, during her tenure as Acting CEO for 2 years, proved herself by working with the Board to turn around a R1,8 billion deficit to an annual surplus of R1,4 billion for the last three years. This surplus is what is being used to fund the campaign against COVID-19. If these funds were not available the NHLS would not have been able to make the investments it has.

7. *How would you respond to the suggestion that, while government is willing to place South Africa in a debilitating 21-day lockdown, the board is unwilling to deal decisively with management challenges at the NHLS?*

It is not clear to what management challenges you are referring. The Board is of the view that it has been decisive in carrying out its responsibilities. If there are individuals who have issues, they should use the mechanisms available to air these viewpoints.

As Chair of the Board, I would urge individuals and organisations to focus on the bigger picture of fighting this pandemic and the challenges it poses to our country. Globally, the NHLS is being applauded for the work that it is doing. We are working with many stakeholders and if organisations have inputs to contribute, the NHLS welcomes these. Many such offers have been embraced.