

Local biotech company seeks government support, as it launches new Covid-19 testing technology that will allow for affordable mass testing

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Cape Town-based Biotech Africa is launching a new testing platform that will allow for the ultra-high throughput of Covid-19 tests, at a fraction of the current testing costs.



This is in response to the shortage of test kits in South Africa, which has resulted in only around three and a half million tests having been conducted in a population of close to 60 million.

“South Africa has the fifth highest number of Covid-19 cases in the world, but only around 5% of our total population has been tested to date. The current testing capacity is around 30,000 tests a day by the state, which is simply not enough for a population the size of ours,” says Paul Anley, BioTech Africa CEO.

BioTech Africa’s new testing technology will allow for up to 50,000 tests to be conducted every day, with potential for additional capacity of 200,000 tests to be added later if required.

The testing platform will be launching within four weeks, as a result the biotech company seeks to begin engagement with government, corporate South Africa and other potential stakeholders.

“The biotechnology industry needs the support of government, corporate and industry South Africa, in overcoming the many high barriers to entry the sector faces, which include funding, regulation and local manufacturing of products at scale. We believe that with their help and working together as a country, we will be able to bring the virus under control and start rebuilding our lives,” Anley explains.

PhD Jenny Leslie, COO of Biotech Africa, explains that the high throughput platform technology is open source and therefore key reagents can be acquired from any supplier. “Many testing platforms being used in South Africa can only make use of components from specific suppliers,, which are in short supply due to global demand.”

The diagnostic platform further employs the same technology as those that were used to test the entire population of Wuhan, China, in just a few days.

“Another advantage is that we can pool a number of samples in one test. This means an entire group or family to be tested

in one reaction. If the test is negative, it means that the full sample group does not have Covid-19, which saves time and money when compared with individual testing. However, if Covid-19 has been detected in the group test sample, each person will then be individually tested, to determine who is infected,” explains Leslie.

Although able to test using current methods of sampling, BioTech Africa’s preferred testing approach is far less invasive than those currently in use, requiring only a saliva sample collected via an air-tight tube, which is then sealed in a collection bag.

“This means no uncomfortable object up your nose or the need for a specialist nurse practitioner, who would normally be required to conduct the sample collection.”

Testing at BioTech Africa’s laboratories is highly automated, which means less room for human error and faster results.

“An added benefit is that the test will not only check for the virus, but will screen the same saliva sample for antibodies too – which means people who test negative are able to discover whether they have already had the virus without knowing, and therefore have antibodies,” explains Anley.

BioTech Africa firmly believes that mass testing is the most practical solution towards opening up our economy in the fastest, safest and most equitable way. “The devastation that the lockdown and lack of adequate state support caused to workers, households and businesses has been of seismic proportions.”

“Through mass testing, South Africans across the entire country will be able to begin putting the pieces of their lives back together and better provide for their families. Entire workforces and learning institutions can be tested before admittance, allowing the infected to be isolated and treated, meaning that more sectors will be able to be reopened safely,” Leslie further explains.

The Covid-19 diagnostic sampling kits will be sold at selected pharmacies nationwide and will cost around half of existing tests. “R850 is the current cost of private testing, while the state pays between R400 and R500 per test,” Anley adds.

South Africa has the requisite knowledge and world-class expertise required to fight the pandemic, as evidenced by BioTech Africa’s successful history in developing and manufacturing recombinant proteins used in the manufacture of HIV diagnostic tests and other human infectious diseases.

“To beat the pandemic, the industry needs support from all levels of society, especially corporate South Africa and the government agencies. Working together is the only way that we will overcome the ramifications of the virus,” concludes Anley and Leslie.

About BioTech Africa

BioTech Africa are specialists in recombinant protein production and bioprocessing. Driven by the global requirement for improved in vitro diagnostics, their current range of highly purified recombinant proteins are used in the manufacture of diagnostic test kits for point of care rapid diagnostics, and research institutions.

They offer a variety of protein expression platforms along with a host of other protein services, including protein refolding and structural biology analysis.

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