



Statement by the Medical Association of the Bahamas

November 5, 2020

Testing Strategy for International Travelers

The Medical Association of the Bahamas (MAB) is the state recognized body that represents all doctors practicing within the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. The following statements articulate the opinions of this body in response to the proposed COVID-19 screening strategy for incoming international travellers. We are disappointed that the Association was not engaged when a strategy for testing was being considered, particularly when the negative outcomes of such decision's rests squarely on our shoulders. Nonetheless, we are ready and committed to caring for those with and without COVID-19 during these challenging times

We have only just begun to recover from the exponential increase in cases that stretched our healthcare facilities and medical professionals to its limits, after the relaxation of travel restrictions in July. As we reopen our borders, it is clear that the United States and many other countries are seeing record numbers of new COVID-19 cases every day. The MAB anticipates that we too will see an increase in cases after welcoming international travelers to our shores. While we understand the economic necessity of this decision, it is important that the government not only institute strict measures to mitigate a resurgence of cases in country, but prepare for any potential consequences that may arise. We cannot afford to lower our guard. A robust and stringent testing policy for all persons entering the country seems prudent as we "test the waters" again.

The MAB is aware that the World Health Organization does not recommend RAT as a screening tool for asymptomatic travellers at ports of entry. We are also aware that the gold standard COVID-19 RT-PCR is not a practical test to perform in this setting. It is clear however, that some form of screening is required to identify those persons who may have been exposed since performing the initial RT-PCR test prior to travel. Given the absence of a more suitable alternative and knowing that the RAT is unlikely to achieve the desired results as proposed, the MAB does not support the elimination of the Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) at the point of entry as it is likely to be the only COVID-19 screening test performed after entry, where testing is guaranteed. Any suspected improvement in test performance that is assumed to occur on day 5 of travel is likely to be offset by the inability to enforce

compliance. The MAB recommends the RAT test for all visitors upon entering The Bahamas and also on the fifth day of their travel. As an alternative, travellers may forgo testing on day 5 by providing a second negative COVID-19 RT-PCR test result at their expense. The MAB further recommends the RAT test for all returning citizens and residents upon entry and on the fifth day of their return IN ADDITION TO MANDATORY QUARANTINE until the second negative RAT test results can be confirmed. Likewise, returning citizens and residents may forgo testing on day 5 by providing a second negative COVID-19 RT-PCR test result at their expense. The request for a mandatory quarantine for returning citizens and residents stems from our experience that suggests the risk of community spread is highest when those who live and work among us have recently travelled.

The MAB also strongly recommends a more intensive campaign focused on preventative measures and health promotion. We agree that most are aware of the need for face masks, hand hygiene and social distancing but attention to other general health measures appears to be lacking. This includes a healthy diet, exercise, and immune boosting vitamins and supplements such as Vitamin D, Vitamin C and Zinc.

The MAB also recommends immediate strengthening of the healthcare system in anticipation of a resurgence of cases. The Public Hospitals Authority (PHA) must increase its capacity outside of the tertiary care centre's, to accommodate and isolate large numbers of COVID-19 cases should they present. The South Beach Clinic should be equipped and staffed to function at full capacity. There should be an abundance of personal protective equipment as well as supplies and resources to increase COVID-19 RT PCR testing. The PHA must test all hospital admissions to reduce the number of hospital related infections that occur on the open wards. Staff should be tested regularly, and policies adopted to reduce the unnecessary quarantining of providers which cripples the ability to provide adequate care to those with and without COVID-19. The relocation of some ambulatory hospital-based services may also be required to provide persons suffering from non-COVID-19 illnesses, uninterrupted access to care.

The MAB is aware that these are unprecedented times. There are no right answers. The physician community is willing to provide input and guidance if given the opportunity. We all have a responsibility to do as much as we can to prevent further loss of life from COVID-19, but we also have a responsibility to ensure that those without COVID-19 are able to access the care that they need. A thoughtful coordinated approach is critical to achieve these goals. We are hopeful that the government consider our recommendations and engage the Medical Association of the Bahamas as we continue to improve the health of our nation.

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Medical Association of the Bahamas.