

Somewhere in a diagnostic laboratory near you.

In the early hours of this morning in a diagnostic medical laboratory in Aotearoa New Zealand, the 3 millionth nasopharyngeal COVID PCR test will be quietly performed with no fuss and no outward celebration.

The Medical Laboratory Scientist will quietly and efficiently finish their shift, take off their PPE, thoroughly wash their hands, change their mask and head out the laboratory door and past the other more visible health professionals on their way home. Once home, like every shift since February 2020, they will shower and change clothes then slump into a chair and ponder just what has happened in the past few hours and the last 18 months. They will watch and listen as numerous news outlets will critique the endless queues and criticise how long an individual test result has taken to come back. Experts who have never stepped inside a diagnostic laboratory will comment on how much quicker the results should be coming and demand more testing speed and effort. This as their hands, arms and shoulders ache after pipetting, pooling and analyzing over a thousand samples during the previous shift. They are working in their surge testing pods on a 24-hour roster and are simply awaiting the return to some normality in Alert Level 2.

These are the everyday health professionals who are a vital cog of the governments COVID-19 elimination plan. They are talented and capable scientists, but they do not change to superheroes in phone boxes either. This is the reality of the hidden world of the unsung heroes of the COVID-19 pandemic response, our medical laboratory workforce.

The first COVID PCR test in Aotearoa New Zealand was performed in late January 2020, the 1 millionth test on the 11th October 2020, the 2 millionth test on 25th April 2021 and the 3 millionth test on today the 1st September 2021. Since the nationwide Level 4 lockdown on 17th August there have been over 420,000 COVID PCR tests performed.

“This milestone is a notable achievement that will pass with the typical low-key fuss that our talented Medical Laboratory Scientists and Technicians have always shown. There is inward satisfaction on just how far we have come in all aspects of COVID-19 testing, but as the Delta variant has highlighted, we are constantly having to look at modifying our testing approaches and surveillance strategies” says Terry Taylor, New Zealand Institute of Medical Laboratory Science (NZIMLS) President.

“This ability to have a surge testing capacity to over 40,000 tests a day continues to be a major weapon in the fight against the challenging COVID-19 variants. That is not to say it is easy, as we have a workforce that has effectively been on edge for 18 months now. Each COVID-19 surge takes a little more out of us mentally and physically but there is determination to see this through” says Taylor.

END

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About the New Zealand Institute of Medical Laboratory Science (NZIMLS)

The NZIMLS was formed in 1946 and is an incorporated society that represents the professional affairs of the nearly 4,000 medical laboratory scientists, technicians and other associated medical laboratory workers and industry representatives in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The NZIMLS publishes the New Zealand Journal of Medical Laboratory Science, provides a CPD programme and activities, professional qualifications and an advisory role to a variety of agencies and health working groups.