

CORONAVIRUS — HEALTH SYSTEM RESPONSE

229. Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY to the Minister for Health:

I refer to the government's response to the impact of COVID-19. Can the minister update the house on the work being undertaken to stop the spread of COVID-19, including any update to the testing regime?

Mr R.H. COOK replied:

I thank the member for her question. It is a very important one.

As members would all have observed over the last few days, we are now getting some great numbers—some terrific numbers—which is a real testament to the discipline and commitment of the community around social distancing, good personal hygiene, and observing the measures we have in place to protect everyone. We have had some great success around suppression, and now we must move to vigilance. We must make sure that we are in a position to ensure that we can see any outbreaks of the virus when they occur. As a result, I announced last week that we would be significantly expanding our testing regime for the COVID-19 clinics and testing sites across Western Australia. Now, any member of the public who is presenting with a fever, a history of fever in the last few days, or a respiratory illness, such as shortness of breath, a cough or a sore throat, will be tested for COVID-19. We want to do this because we want to see as wide a group and the largest number of people tested as possible.

There are now nine COVID clinics across Western Australia. In addition, members of our regional communities can be tested at either their WA Country Health Service clinics, the Aboriginal Medical Service clinics, or any of the Royal Flying Doctor Service primary care clinics. We will soon expand that even further. I announced recently that we would soon be moving to allow people to be tested via a referral from their general practitioner, which we anticipate will be done by telehealth, so people would not even have to set foot in their GP's clinic. They will be able to go to a collection centre run by some of our great partners in the private pathology industry to get themselves swabbed and tested. Once again, we are making sure that we extend the breadth and the volume of people we are testing.

In other news, I announced last week that we have launched a new mental health campaign. Many members have observed that the pandemic has not only a physical impact, but also a mental health impact. People who are isolating, although practising good physical distancing, are becoming socially disconnected. We have launched a \$455 000 campaign to remind people about what they can do to protect their mental health and wellbeing during this period. Think Mental Health's "Be Positive. Be Connected. Be Active." campaign focuses on self-care and wellbeing strategies. It provides ways that people can support themselves and each other, and where they can get further help, should they need it.

I also want to highlight some research that is now being undertaken in Western Australia as part of a national program to explore the impact of certain vaccines as part of the overall research into a vaccine or treatment for COVID-19.

At least 2 000 WA healthcare workers will be tested to see whether the existing tuberculosis vaccine can help reduce their chance of COVID-19 infection or lessen the severity of the symptoms and boost immunity. It is called the BRACE trial. This national program run in partnership with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne has been endorsed by the World Health Organization. Up to 750 frontline staff from Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, 750 frontline staff from Fiona Stanley Hospital and 500 frontline staff from Perth Children's Hospital will participate. They will receive their standard influenza vaccine but half of the participants will also receive a Bacille Calmette-Guérin, or tuberculosis, vaccine. The program seeks to establish whether the BCG vaccine, which is known to boost immunity against a range of infections, has a similar effect against COVID-19. The trial is led in Western Australia by the great Telethon Kids Institute.

In particular, I want to pass on my thanks to the Minderoo Foundation for its \$1.5 million commitment, which is making sure that Western Australian frontline healthcare workers can participate in this world-leading research. It is a terrific opportunity to engage all our partners right across the health sector, including PathWest, which will be doing a lot of the testing in relation to this virus, and I would like to congratulate all involved.