

Dr. Harsh Vardhan reviews the sampling and testing strategy for COVID 19

Inter-departmental synergy will catalyse the efforts for finding better scientific solutions to combat the threat occurred due to COVID-19: Dr. Harsh Vardhan

Research for solutions of COVID-19 should continue in dynamic mode simultaneously with the disease management efforts: Dr. Harsh Vardhan

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Dr. Harsh Vardhan, Union Minister of Health & Family Welfare held a meeting with senior officials of ICMR, Department of Science & Technology, Bio-technology and CSIR to review the sampling and testing strategy for COVID-19, here yesterday. There was an elaborate discussion on the issues like procurement of reagents, website integration, data management and analysis, dashboards, research studies both planned and done so far etc.

Dr. Harsh Vardhan informed that he had a discussion in the morning with Health Ministers of the States/UTs about the actions being taken by Union Health Ministry, reviewed the status of preparedness of States/UTs and assured them with all possible support. He also lauded the States for active surveillance, effective contact tracing and their preparedness for containment and management of COVID-19.

During the meeting, it was informed by DG, ICMR that 129 government laboratories are functional with a testing capacity of 13000 tests per day along with 49 NABL accredited private lab. The private chains have around 16000 collection centres. It was also informed that adequate test kits have been procured and disseminated across the States for any further eventualities. He was also informed that Rapid Antibody test kits are also ordered. As of now 38,442 tests have been done with 1,334 tests in private labs across the country.

Further discussions were held with the three Secretaries of Ministry of Science & Technology about status of research into developing solutions for handling COVID-19.

Secretary DST, Dr. Ashutosh Sharma informed that through mapping of the COVID-19 related technology capabilities in start-ups, academia, R&DLabs and industry, over 500 entities in the areas of diagnostics, drugs, ventilators, protection gear, disinfecting systems, etc. have been identified. Over 200 proposals have been received in the last one week against the funding calls of DST, from which over 20 entities are under active consideration for support in the first phase, taking into account the relevance, cost, speed and scale of solutions to manage COVID-19.

Secretary DBT Dr. Renu Swarup informed that Department of Biotechnology has formed a Consortium to support the development of Medical equipments, Diagnostics, Therapeutics, Drugs and Vaccines to meet the Healthcare Challenges. She stated that the manufacturing capacity of the First Indigenous kit developed by Start up in Pune is being scaled up to produce nearly one lakh kits per week. A manufacturing facility for indigenous development of Ventilators, testing kits, imaging equipment and ultrasound and high end radiology equipment has been set up in Vishakhapatnam where manufacturing will start in first week of April. DBT along with Drug Controller General of India has developed and notified a Rapid Response Regulatory Framework to provide expedited regulatory approvals for all diagnostics drugs and vaccines. Vaccine development is being supported with three Indian industries. Research on Therapeutic and drug development has started.

DG, CSIR Dr. Shekhar Mande informed that CSIR is working on a five-pronged strategy to find S&T solutions for COVID-19, comprising of: Surveillance using digital and molecular methods which includes genome sequencing of the virus strains across the country; Cheaper, fast and accurate diagnosis methods; intervention strategies comprising of repurposing drugs and developing new drugs etc.; R&D in Hospital assistive equipment; and, development of Supply chain logistics models for items required for Covid-19 mitigation. He informed that in all the points mentioned above, CSIR has forged collaborations with private sector.

Dr. Harsh Vardhan appreciated the public health surveillance and response, technical guidance and laboratory support being given by ICMR. He also appreciated the Department of Science & Technology, Bio-technology and CSIR for their support in development of Ventilators, Testing kits, PPEs etc. indigenously at the time of need.

He directed that all efforts should be made to procure requisite testing kits and reagents urgently and supply them to the laboratories across the country. He also directed that it should be ensured that states have all the required facilities and it should be ensured that they do not face any shortages on account of testing kits, reagents or equipment. He also directed that extra support shall be given to those States/UTs who are not having any laboratories/testing facilities as well as to North Eastern States and UT of Ladakh.

He further directed that all efforts should be made to ensure that quality of the testing kits procured by the Government or by the private labs is not compromised and quality assessment of the kits shall be done regularly. He also directed that for this a clear quality control mechanism and protocol needs to be developed and implemented by ICMR immediately so that the quality is assured on a daily basis by all the laboratories.

Dr. Harsh Vardhan also said that research work should continue in dynamic mode simultaneously with the COVI-19 management efforts. He exhorted the scientists that India should rise to the occasion and develop solutions not only for India but also for the world.

The meeting was attended by Dr. Balram Bhargava, DG, ICMR, Dr. Renu Swarup, Secretary, DBT, Dr. Shekhar Mande, DG, CSIR, Dr. Ashutosh Sharma, Secretary, DST, Dr. Anurag Agrawal, Director, CSIR-IGIB, Dr. Raman R. Gangakhedkar, Senior Scientist, ICMR, Ms. as well as other senior officers and scientists of ICMR.

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