

From COVID-19 Directorate



Phillip Evans
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Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3SQ

Your Ref:
Our Ref: FOI DOH/2021-0062
Date: 25 March 2021

Dear Mr Evans

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000

I firstly must apologise for the delay in answering your request for information. The Department acknowledges public interest in the transparency and accountability of government, and the immeasurable public interest associated with the current pandemic and how that affects us all. We fully recognise that disclosure of information will give citizens, like yourself, confidence that decisions are taken on the basis of the best available information.

The Department is aware that we are outside the legislative time to respond. However, as I hope you will understand, resources within the Department and wider health organisations throughout Northern Ireland, have been stretched over the last number of months due to ongoing and ever changing COVID-19 challenges. A considerable number of staff have been redeployed from their normal “day jobs” to work solely on the response to the current pandemic.

Unfortunately, the staff who are in the best position to answer your request, are the very staff engaged in the daily discussions and consultations with the Minister and the Executive in considering the most appropriate course of action to steer us through the current crisis. Nevertheless, I am now in a position to respond to your request from the 08 January 2021

Please find the Department’s response at Annex A.

I would advise that a significant amount of information underpinning decisions taken by the Department and the Health Minister is derived from work undertaken by other organisations such as the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). As well as this information, the Department publishes a range of relevant information on its website, including the daily dashboard. This information is accessible via the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Additionally, the Health Minister provides regular updates to MLAs during plenary sessions and the Health Minister and Departmental officials regularly attend Northern Ireland Assembly Committee evidence sessions. Recordings and transcripts of these can be viewed on the NI Assembly website.

If you feel that the information we have provided does not fully meet your request please contact us at covid19directorate@health-ni.gov.uk in the first instance. You have the right to request that the Department formally review this decision within two calendar months of the date of this letter. If you wish to do so, please write to Mr Brendan O'Neill (foi@health-ni.gov.uk), Annexe 3, Castle Buildings, Stormont, Belfast BT4 3SQ.

If after such an internal review you are still unhappy with the response, you have the right to appeal to the Information Commissioner at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, CHESHIRE SK9 5AF, who will undertake an independent review.

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

COVID-19 Directorate

Please provide a full, accurate and complete list of records held within your office, and or under your authority, describing the isolation of a SARS-COV-2 virus, directly taken from a symptomatic patient of COVID-19 where the sample was not first combined with any other source of genetic material (not limited but by way of example monkey kidney cells, aka vero cells, liver cancer cells) thereby eliminating contamination as a possible alternative source of sampling. Please note isolation is used in the normally understood meaning of the word – the act of separating a thing from another.

I am not referring, and hence not requesting, to isolation meaning the culture of something else, the performance of an amplification test (eg PCR test which only detect mRNA or DNA) or the sequencing of “something”.

If any records match the above description and are available to the public elsewhere, please provide enough information so that I may identify and access each record with certainty (i.e. title, author(s), date, journal, and weblink or location where the public may access it).

Response:

The Department does not hold the specific information you are requesting. However, the Department has obtained information from the Regional Virus Laboratory (RVL), which may be of interest to you.

Information from the RVL

The RVL (and HSC laboratories in NI) do not use viral cell culture as part of their clinical diagnostic repertoire.

All respiratory samples for SARS-CoV-2 testing undergo Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), isothermal amplification or antigen testing.

Validation against an extensive range of microorganisms to check for cross reactivity is undertaken before any laboratory test goes into diagnostic service. PCR tests look for SARS-CoV-2 virus directly from patient's samples and not via Monkey kidney cells or any other cell culture system.

Finally, I would advise that the Department receives and answers a range of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests each year. Below is a link to the appropriate section of the Department's website where you will find FOI disclosures from 2016 onwards and classified by year:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/doh-significant-foi-disclosures>