Encouraging COVID-19 testing throughout Queensland

Summary: HCQ Consumer Conversation, Tuesday 28 July 2020

Testing remains one of Queensland's best defences against a sustained outbreak of COVID-19.

A Consumer Conversation on Tuesday 28 July 2020 (21 consumers participated) focused on **the top barriers to testing**, **how the process can be made easier** and **what the key messages are that would motivate people to get a COVID-19 test**.

Overview of consumer feedback

- Fear, uncertainty, confusion, mis-interpretation of information and complacency are currently the over-arching barriers to testing across the state.
- Consumers are looking for a clear and unambiguous testing pathway which is convenient, supportive, nuanced and needs-focused.

Top Barriers

Advice about symptoms is difficult to interpret. Many consumers are unsure what to do if:
- they have mild symptoms e.g. "*is a case of the sniffles a reason to get tested*?"
- they have chronic conditions, allergies or illnesses which mean that the named symptoms are normal for them.
- they have just one symptom rather than all the named symptoms.
- their environment is a common trigger for the named symptoms e.g. living in a dry, dusty area or blossom season.

Medical jargon and complex explanations commonly lead to misinterpretation. One consumer described how a CALD consumer "*went to the GP to get tested but was told to go away because they were 'asymptomatic'. However, the consumer didn't understand this word.*"

Unclear testing pathway
"*Consumers do not know where to get tested e.g locations. Also how to get to locations and many consumers especially seniors are confused with the messages which often change.*"

Messaging around the process and the different pathways is unfamiliar and unclear. There is also little guidance on the best pathway to choose for individual needs and circumstances. A consumer checking test sites expressed their frustration: "*From Regents Park, nearest was Acacia Ridge about 20 minutes away, but need a GP referral. **Too complex to bother**.*"

The digital divide presents another barrier to reliable information about testing. "*How do you get some CALD communities that do not use internet and smart phones to get info about testing?*".

The logistics and consequences are too complicated and frightening
The consequences of testing can feel overwhelming, remain unarticulated or not addressed by the current public health messaging. Some of the fears and concerns included:

- *What will happen if I test positive?*
- *If I have to isolate how can I get my food without transport or technology?*
- *Waiting in cars in testing clinics for long periods is challenging for children and adults with disabilities like autism and some cognitive disability.*
- *Fear of being exposed to COVID while waiting for the test.*
- *What if I have it, will it hurt, what if someone finds out I've been tested/got it?; time off work or away from small children, parent/spouse that you care for; and transport*
- *An elderly resident of our small rural town is hesitant to be tested because of the stigma if she was positive as everyone in town would probably know.*

Self-isolation
The requirement to self-isolate whilst waiting for the result is currently one of the main barriers to testing. This is partly because language and messaging about testing timeframes and next steps are confusing and inconsistent. Some health professionals are also assuming consumers will self-isolate rather than giving explicit instructions during testing.

Self-isolation is also perceived as a significant challenge so *"people may delay testing in order to 'prepare'".* Alternatively, people may choose not to be tested or not to adhere to the directive for fear of losing their job if they don't have sick leave or other financial safety nets.

Complacency, apathy or denial
- Low infection rates in Queensland compared to Victoria/NSW.
- Belief by many that the older generation is more susceptible.
- Live in areas where COVID- 19 has been non-existent for a prolonged period.
- Too busy or misunderstanding the seriousness.

Getting to a testing location
Consumers in both metropolitan and rural and remote areas pointed out that a lot of people, including anyone living with a disability or has mobility issues, don't have the means to travel to testing locations or the ability to get there.

The manner of the testing itself
"*Unpleasant*" is how one consumer described the testing process. Consumers also highlighted the intrusiveness of the testing and the impacts on people with complex needs and sensory processing issues.

How can getting a test be made easier?

Consumers came up with a range of ideas and suggestions for making it easier for people to participate in testing.

Communications

- Clarity and consistency is crucial to cut through the different opinions available to the public.
- Invest in checking people's interpretation and understanding of the messaging. *"Context matters: From Boulia to Gympie, different mobs are saying that these symptoms are my everyday life. So how we check for understanding is important."*
- Reach out to local leadership to set the tone for understanding and interpretation.
- Target messaging to particular groups: "*Is consistency of messaging the only goal? e.g. truck drivers should regularly test even if asymptomatic."*
- Work from the basis that people have a low level of health literacy.
- Remove jargon e.g. instead of asymptomatic, use 'symptom-free.'
- Directly address and seek to reassure people about key fears and concerns.
- Conduct a COVID-19 health census so that the Government can target information accurately.
- Include COVID-19 information and advertorials in disability and aged care support package publications.
- TV / radio segments that portray people's experience of having had COVID-19.
- Is messaging around testing being contradicted by Queensland tourism campaign being "Good to Go".

Take testing to people
There was widespread support amongst consumers for routine in-home testing especially for people with disabilities and groups who are at risk. Suggestions included mobile vans going from suburb to suburb so people do not need to leave their homes like the old TB vans.

- Support people to self-isolate - develop a wrap-around testing protocol which incorporates supporting self-isolating and maps out what happens after a positive test result so people can manage the stress of testing.

- Promote the Community Recovery Hotline to help people get food or essential items.

Offer alternative testing options
Although self-testing is not yet available and the saliva test is not yet validated in Queensland, consumers were concerned about the trauma associated with the current test for anyone requiring repeated testing e.g. people in residential facilities or requiring at home support.

Other suggestions included:

- Increase visibility of teams of testers on roadside (like police road checks).
- Reward people for compliance.
- Mass testing of sample population e.g a suburb, to establish the % of people who have had COVID but are undocumented.
- Replicate education outreach work - Outbreak Management Teams have been doing education in Victoria for groups identified at higher risk and in at-risk settings.
- Invite people to leave contact info so that health services can arrange appropriate testing depending on an assessment of risk.
- Reach consumers in high traffic locations e.g. Centrelink, chemists, shopping centre pop-ups.
- Ask doctors to contact their patients to urge them to test - like a flu injection.

One key message that would encourage people to get a COVID-19 test?

- The importance of self-isolating.
- Repeated testing may be required.
- You are protecting yourself and others by having the test.
- Isolate/wear a mask if in doubt!
- A consistent message from someone who is widely respected e.g. Premier or CHO.
- Target young people: it's not just an old person's illness. You have responsibility to others.
- Testing criteria have changed. Now, all of us should consider being tested.
- Learn from Victoria about self-isolation before and after testing.
- Covid-19 can kill you, your family or friends! Consider messaging using "shock" advertising as was done with smoking. Show images of people in ICU with messages from nurses.
- This is about keeping us all safe.
- We expect our health services to be the best so everyone must participate.
- Better to be safe than sorry. Who wants to pass on COVID-19 to someone who may die.
- Relevant, local rationale.