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Taiwan requires automated PCR tests

By Liu Te-yen 劉得彥



The COVID-19 outbreak is putting considerable strain on medical treatment in Taiwan. A good way to reduce the workload of healthcare and disease prevention personnel would be to let machines do any jobs that do not need a human.

A final diagnosis of COVID-19 is made based on the results of a person's polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, which takes three to four hours when done by hand. A rise in screening volume pushes facilities to increase testing capacity — more equipment, more personnel and longer working hours — which greatly increases the screening staff's risk of infection. If the tests were automated, it would reduce the risk of infection, as well as boosting testing capacity.

In April last year, TCI Gene and the Ministry of Health and Welfare launched the Quantitative Virus Scanner-96 (QVS-96) — Taiwan's first automated testing device for SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19.

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The QVS-96, which sells for US\$700,000, is reported to be the second such device in the world. It can operate around the clock, conducting 900 tests per day with 99.9 percent accuracy.

Media reports at the time said that the virus scanner had been validated by the Centers for Disease Control and would be used in the agency's Kunyang Laboratory, adding that satisfactory performance would see the scanner installed elsewhere, depending on the COVID-19 situation, and would improve testing efficiency during the flu season.

Reports last month said that TCI Gene had suspended the planned export of two QVS-96S virus scanners, with a daily testing capacity of 1,900 tests, and that the company had joined the national disease prevention team.

In December last year, LabTurbo Biotech and the National Defense Medical Center's Institute of Preventive Medicine finished developing the LabTurbo AIO 48 — a fully automated testing device capable of conducting 1,000 tests per day.

These developments show that the nation's biotechnology industry has had great success at boosting testing capacity.

As of March 31 last year, Taiwan had four testing and treatment facilities, which could conduct 3,200 COVID-19 tests per day. On May 15 this year, the Central Epidemic Command Center said that there were 126 such facilities, capable of conducting 16,000 tests per day. The ratio of centers to tests shows that the increase in testing capacity has mainly been achieved by increasing the number of testing facilities.

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As the QVS-96 seems to have only been installed at the Kunyang Laboratory and one private facility, Landseed International Hospital in Taoyuan, it is difficult to see what kind of advanced approach the government might be deploying to boost screening capacity.

Taiwan makes sophisticated instruments that have been certified in the US and European nations, so why not allocate NT\$200 million (US\$7.24 million) of the NT\$630 billion COVID-19 relief budget to purchase 10 automated virus scanners?

This would give the nation a daily testing capacity of 19,000 tests.

Such an investment would provide real relief for all of the disease prevention personnel, who have been working hard day and night on screening and contact tracing, and help to maintain adequate healthcare capacity for patients who need it. It would also allow local governments to put people's minds at rest by speeding up the screening process.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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