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India aims to double capacity for making indigenised Covid-19 testing kits: Expert

Bengaluru: India aims to double the capacity of indigenised Covid-19 testing kits over the next three to six months, to increase availability and reduce costs, according to the head of the government's life sciences innovation hub.

Efforts are also on to support diagnostic kit manufacturers in the country to scale up capacities and focus on making certain high-quality reagents that are used in tests to detect the Covid-19 virus, said Taslimarif Saiyed, CEO of the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Platforms (C-CAMP), which is under the Department of Biotechnology.

"We are easily producing a couple of lakhs indigenised testing kits as a country and we want to go further. But these couple of lakhs are also invisible because many companies that are selling it are still importing some of the reagents, that is why it continues to be costly. We do want to do double the capacity and go beyond," he said. "When it is completely indigenised, it (costs) can be brought down to a few hundred rupees."

C-CAMP is anchoring a project called Indigenisation of Diagnostics (InDx) to encourage local production of reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) testing kits and is working with about 40 firms. The project is intended to hand-hold small enterprises involved in developing such kits. It employs a dynamic digital supply chain platform developed free of cost by IT services behemoth Tata Consultancy Services (TCS).

Citing government data, Saiyed said currently more than a million tests are being done per day on average in India, and nearly 200,000 test kits being used are indigenous ones.

Currently, one Covid-19 testing kit costs between Rs 2,500 and Rs 3,500.

Some of the reagents used in indigenised testing kits are, however, imported.

Industry experts said India has been able to indigenise less than 50% of its requirement for reagents.

Mahesh Bhalgat, chief operating officer of Syngene International, said the ratio of applied versus approved testing kits, which is about 50:50, suggests that there is demand for quality kits.

Syngene, the research division of biopharmaceuticals firm Biocon, provides important probes and primers for development of testing kits.

“Over the last few months, some of the key components required for kits are becoming amenable to Indian manufacturers, since these components are now being manufactured in India,” Bhalgat said.

The manufacturing capacity of quality probes, primers and enzymes needs to be scaled up for India to increase the production of indigenised test kits.

“If any of these becomes a bottleneck, the capacity comes down,” said Bhalgat.

Despite the push for capacity expansion for making indigenised kits, India continues to face challenges as “this requires scientific and technical capabilities at large scale”, according to C-CAMP.

The government is also planning to create an ecosystem for development kits in India to prepare for infectious disease outbreaks in future.

“We are working with 40-odd companies and we will put the pieces together and then we will find out the leaders who can produce at large scale. This will help build the ecosystem for developing an Indian kit for any other future infection,” Saiyed said.

Source: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/healthcare/biotech/healthcare/india-aims-to-double-capacity-for-making-indigenised-covid-19-testing-kits-expert/articleshow/78442193.cms>