

Jamaica equipped to conduct Zika testing for other countries

Jamaica is equipped to conduct Zika virus testing on behalf of other countries if so assigned by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Acting Director of the National Virology Reference Laboratory at the University Hospital of the West Indies (UHWI), Professor Monica Smikle, said the facility is a valid WHO testing agency. Members of staff have also benefited from training from the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO). The certification to test for Zika, Professor Smikle informed, comes from the WHO through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "There was a process of capacity building after which tested samples were sent to the CDC in Puerto Rico for validation. Following subsequent reports that all tests were completely successful, the lab was given the go-ahead to proceed with testing here in Jamaica," she explained. The Trinidad and Tobago-based Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) was designated as the Zika testing lab in the Caribbean when the virus entered the region. With the need to facilitate faster diagnosis for Zika, the Government of Jamaica provided \$10 million to upgrade the UHWI Virology lab to equip it to test for the disease locally, and also provide increased capacity for the diagnosis of dengue and chikungunya. WHO/PAHO Country representative, Dr Noreen Jack, explained that while there is little difference in the cost of having the test done in the island versus sending samples to CARPHA, the benefit is in the faster turnaround time for results. She noted that PAHO has been supporting in-country testing and capacity building for Jamaica and other countries in the region. "We had a consultant virologist here to provide support and this was also done for Barbados and Suriname," she explained. Acting Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Winston De La Haye, said that while the Ministry's interest is in procuring the equipment and ensuring that the lab has adequate chemicals for the testing of Jamaicans, this does not preclude the facility from assisting other countries.