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By Samantha Kummerer | April 10, 2020 at 7:50 PM EDT - Updated April 11 at 10:39 AM

ANDERSON COUNTY, S.C. (WMBF) - A new type of COVID-19 test will be able to determine if patients have already had the virus or are immune to it.

Labtech Diagnostics, an Anderson County-based lab, said beginning next week it will start processing 20,000 of the new tests a week. There are similar serology tests rolling out throughout the country but the lab said this will be one of the first available tests in the southeast.

Instead of a nasal swab, the new test is a blood test that examines a patient's antibodies. Those antibodies will be able to reveal who is infected but also who has already been exposed to the virus, recovering from the virus and who may be immune to the virus.

"From the standpoint of health care providers, this is great because you can actually select those people who are immune to the virus and actually have them provide healthcare to those who are actively infected," explained Dr. Bill Hinnant, an adjunct professor at Clemson University and General Counsel for Labtech Diagnostics.

This is information that current testing doesn't reveal but Hinnant said it is critical for experts to gain a better understanding of the virus.

"Gives us a demographic picture of who is actually infected, who is recovering and who is immune. Right now, there is a general feeling that we are no way capturing the full magnitude of the number of cases out there," he said.

The antibody test also comes with advantages that will help expand testing. The test is cheaper than the nasal swab, produces results quicker and reduces the potential for false positives, according to Hinnant.

"It's frustrating, I think, for providers and for patients to have to wait so long to get an answer and it delays treatment and then it delays the identification of patients who are infectious," Hinnant said.

Hinnant said he sees antibody tests being useful for testing first responders and health care workers but can also see it replacing the current method.

He believes the simpler and faster test will allow experts to get a better understanding of the virus in a community by allowing testing to be expanded.

"The most important thing in winning this war against the virus is testing, testing, testing," he said.

More than 28,000 South Carolinians had been tested as of Friday. In the state, and across the country, a shortage of testing supplies has limited who received a COVID-19 test. The lack of expansive testing creates an unclear picture of just how many people have been exposed to the virus.

Hinnant hopes the new antibody test will help South Carolina get a more accurate picture.

“The value of testing is not so much just to identify whether you as an individual are infected or whether you are immune, it’s to allow us to put together this puzzle that gives us a picture of what’s going on in the population because if we know that we’re on that downturn where cases are starting to become less frequent, and we know as well that a certain proportion of our population is immune, that’s a signal that we can start again to be together,” he said.

Labtech Diagnostics is hoping to have the new blood test available at Monday at its clinics across the state. The lab works with Coastal Urgent Care and Coastal Wellness Center in the Grand Strand.

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