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## Department of Health hits back at claim by Taoiseach that NI is not testing for new strains of Covid-19



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Taoiseach Micheal Martin

### Staff Reporter

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The Department of Health has hit back at a claim by Taoiseach Micheal Martin that Northern Ireland is not testing for new strains of coronavirus.

Speaking to RTE on Saturday, the Fianna Fail leader said it was his "understanding" that the authorities were not testing for the new variant of Covid-19.

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"When I discussed this with the leaders their view was the variant doesn't appear to be as big an issue in the north... I can't understand that," he said.

Last night, the Department of Health described such claims as misleading.

"To suggest that NI is inactive in this field would be wholly incorrect - and is unfair to the dedicated, expert local staff working intensively in this area," a spokesperson said.

Northern Ireland scientists are part of the UK's COG-UK Consortium, which is a partnership of NHS organisations including the four Public Health Agencies of the UK, the Wellcome Sanger Institute and over 12 academic partners -who are all providing sequencing and analysis capacity.

Whole genome sequencing (WGS) has been in place in NI from an early stage of this pandemic, the Department said.

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- Fears new Covid-19 strains will spread in NI as 3,000 people arrived in Republic from Brazil and South Africa in recent weeks (</news/health/coronavirus/fears-new-covid-19-strains-will-spread-in-ni-as-3000-people-arrived-in-republic-from-brazil-and-south-africa-in-recent-weeks/40005897.html>)
- 'We will never get the lost time back' - Photos reveal shocking toll on grandfather separated from family due to Covid-19 (</news/health/coronavirus/we-will-never-get-the-lost-time-back-photos-reveal-shocking-toll-on-grandfather-separated-from-family-due-to-covid-19/40005891.html>)
- Northern Ireland Covid cases surpass 100,000 as another 14 people die (</news/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-covid-cases-surpass-100000-as-another-14-people-die/40004619.html>)

In April 2020, the clinical laboratory team in NI's Regional Virus Laboratory (RVL) initiated a workstream on whole genome sequencing of the SARS-CoV-2 virus as part of the national COG-UK sequencing program.

Within three weeks, the Department of Health said, the RVL Team had prototype Whole Genome Sequence for the virus in place, working in collaboration with Queen's University Belfast.

By the end of April, the NI Team were submitting viral genome data to the COG-UK program, and by December 2020 over 2000 SARS-CoV-2 genomes from NI had been submitted.

In the last week, over 200 genome sequences were reported and the RVL Team is now on track to further increase its WGS throughput - likely to over 300 sequences next week and over 400 the following week, the Department said last night,

"To suggest that NI is inactive in this field would be wholly incorrect - and is unfair to the dedicated, expert local staff working intensively in this area," a spokesperson said.

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"Work is ongoing in relation to increasing the level of publicly available data on the 'B.1.1.7 variant' in NI.

"In addition to whole genome sequencing, the prevalence of the 'B.1.1.7 variant' in the UK regions, including NI, is being monitored via PCR testing data - and reported on publicly by the Office for National Statistics."



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