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Authorities order B2C retailers to halt antibody test sales

**Rachel Lewis**

MAY 28, 2020

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Regulatory bodies in the UK and Spain have ordered retailers, UK telehealth company Babylon among them, to stop selling B2C antibody tests. Home collection and analysis is likely to be a multi-billion market but the major lab groups are stuck selling B2B.

Public Health England (PHE) ordered Babylon and pharmacy group Superdrug to stop selling the tests until it has established their accuracy. It had earlier approved an Abbott and a Roche test for use within the NHS to test frontline and care workers using venous blood samples but the retailers had adapted the test for capillary (finger prick) blood.

With both tests, the patient is responsible for collecting the blood sample through pinprick and posting it to a Eurofins lab for analysis. Immediately after the Babylon launch, Abbott issued a statement to say that its Architect SARS-CoV-2 test was developed only for laboratory professionals to use. "The Abbott test has been validated for use with a venous blood sample that is taken by a healthcare provider. The test is not intended for use as a home test and it should not be conducted with a finger stick blood sample," it added.

Babylon CMO Mobasher Butt says that the tests had been assessed by Eurofins for home finger-prick tests and reported 98.5% sensitivity and 99.5% specificity when carried out on capillary blood. CEO Ali Parsa added that it would source and add as many approved tests as possible.

The antibody testing market could be worth up to €3.3bn in France and €1bn in Germany if each person is tested once under national tariffs. Home testing kits are still for sale to individuals in both of these markets although the Spanish Medicines Agency ordered the closure of website Covidtest.es selling tests for €79, saying that its product was a medical device that should not be sold to individuals.

The market becomes much larger still where individuals or employers seek cash payment tests for easier access – say where antibody tests are rationed in the public healthcare system. The test from Babylon and

Superdrug was sold at an “at cost” price of £69 while German B2C wellbeing testing company Lykon is also selling a kit for around €80 (which it says is non-profit). Compare this to reimbursement rates in Germany of €11 under the statutory insurers (EBM) and €21 under private insurance (GOA).

As one source in the French market says: “The market is simple. It’s everybody. Who doesn’t want to know if they have been infected?”

The quality, however, remains an issue. A source involved in COVID-19 testing in Germany tells HBI that he has confidence in the home collection kits like the ones sold by Babylon, but ‘rapid tests’, where the analysis is done at home, are still at a low level of quality. They are not yet approved in the UK but have started to be sold B2C in France.

TestezMoi is the first website set up specifically for COVID-19 antibody testing and it claims its rapid test has 99% reliability. It sells kits for €17-21 where the patient does both the sample collection and the analysis at home. It has partnered with biotech company xRapid, which provides the AI solution for analysing the results and the app that allows patients to read it.

xRapid CEO Jean Viry-Babel tells HBI that TestezMoi was selling a test every minute when it launched. If that demand continued 24/7 for 365 days then it could turn over a maximum of €11m a year. He argues that rapid testing is just as reliable but the lobbying power of the lab sector means that venous blood collection remains more widely accepted and capillary (finger prick) blood collection isn’t reimbursable.

“The trick is that they don’t do a finger prick because by drawing blood they can charge more – it’s a medical act. On top of this, you also need a prescription so the GP is also making money. It’s a big scam and the labs have the monopoly on state subsidies.”

For now, much of the B2C antibody testing market (reliable or non-reliable) remains outside of the pockets of the lab sector, while they will earn income through analysing the kits sold by Babylon they are losing potential market share to those retailers and others selling rapid testing kits, from which the labs earn nothing at all. That market share rests instead with e-commerce sites, pharmacies or fringe outpatient clinics that have punched above their purchasing power to acquire rapid testing supplies.

HBI has found tests available in Italy through Medcall, where for €170 a doctor will go to a patient’s house and extract the sample for rapid testing, a Harley Street clinic that requires venous blood collection for £250, and even beautician supplier Beautytec in the Netherlands for €15.

Our German source says that the failure to move comes from logistical problems. “The labs don’t have a supply chain that includes packing, shipping and collecting to and from households and the big groups don’t have online stores set up in Western Europe. In that region, labs have mostly B2B contacts and not B2C relationships with individuals.”

Our Analysis: So the antibody testing market is currently like the Wild West: lawless and rough. Faulty and unreliable testing B2C kits pose a reputational risk to the lab sector regardless or not of whether they are involved and failing to speak directly to the customer now could pinch sales further down the line.

The question is whether this will spur Europe’s largest lab groups to set up e-commerce sites where they can sell antibody tests and use this as a launchpad for other wellness tests later down the line. HBI understands that Unilabs has at some point in the last year been in the process of trying to launch one but it’s not clear how much this would allow home sample collection. Setting up an e-commerce website just for B2C antibody testing will be expensive and probably not worth it – but there’s no other way that they will be able to capture that market.

We would welcome your thoughts on this story. Email your views to [Rachel Lewis](#) or call 0207 183 3779.

