Trudeau Institute supplies hospital with COVID test liquid

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Coronavirus

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Clarkson University students Lindsey Norfleet and Samantha Penman do lab work at Trudeau Institute in Saranac Lake in January 2018 as part of the
Trudeau Scholars program. (Enterprise photo — Glynis Hart)

SARANAC LAKE — Trudeau Institute is developing thousands of COVID-19 test elements for Adirondack Health, expanding the testing capacity at the Adirondack Medical Center hospital by nearly ten-fold.

Specifically, the institute is producing the viral transport media, the chemical liquid in which test specimens are sent to laboratories for analysis.

Adirondack Health Communications Director Matt Scollin said the AMC hospital had around 260 test kits before Trudeau Institute manufactured 2,000 kits’ worth of the liquid by April 30.

“*We were so excited we actually drove up there and picked them up,*” Scollin said.

He said the hospital has plenty of swabs used in the tests, which are sourced from other places.

“The timing of this delivery could not have been better,” Scollin wrote in a press release, “having come shortly after the state Department of Health issued guidance that widened the criteria for COVID-19 testing to include 40 categories of ‘essential workers.’”

Scollin said Adirondack Health is now able to test all residents at its Mercy Living Center nursing home, all staff and all hospital inpatients presenting with COVID-19-like symptoms. He said if a surge of cases had happened without proper test kit stock, it could have been used up.

“Two-hundred fifty can sound like a lot, but they can go really, really quickly,” Scollin said.

Trudeau Institute and Adirondack Health began collaborating on a response
to the pandemic last month, when Trudeau dedicated lab space to sterilize masks for front-line health care workers, using vaporized hydrogen peroxide.

Trudeau Institute traces its origin back to Saranac Lake in 1884, when Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau founded it as the Saranac Laboratory for the Study of Tuberculosis. Saranac Lake’s TB curing industry fell apart in the middle of the 20th century as drugs to cure the disease became available, and Trudeau Institute was reestablished in 1964, soon moving to its current location on the shore of Lower Saranac Lake.

Director and President Atsuo Kuki said in the past two months the institute has refocused much of its energy on the fight against coronavirus.

“Our researchers are accustomed to being on the front line of global scientific research — but being able to contribute so close to home is especially meaningful,” Kuki wrote in the press release.

Scollin said the hospital’s recently retired Administrative Lab Director John Sibley saw the need for tests coming early in 2020, and sourced a decent amount of supplies before he left, which Scollin said got the hospital started on the right foot as supply chains locked up.

“We would put in orders to all of our vendors, and they would just be back-ordered and back-ordered,” Scollin said. “Then you’d think you were going to get some, and they just wouldn’t show up.”

Clinicians at Adirondack Health have updated their testing algorithm — a complex flow chart to lay out which kinds of patients with which kinds of symptoms get tested, and how.

Hospitals, including AMC, had previously limited COVID-19 testing to those
individuals with symptoms severe enough to be admitted as inpatients, due to the limited availability of test kits nationally.

“Thanks to our close working relationship with Trudeau Institute ... we are able to test for COVID-19 on a much larger scale in Franklin and Essex counties,” Sylvia Getman, Adirondack Health president and CEO, wrote in the press release. “Dr. Kuki and his team are not only helping to keep our staff safe by assisting in the sterilization of our N95 and surgical masks, but also helping to keep our communities safe by producing this critical viral transport media for COVID-19 test specimens.”

AMC is also conducting antibody tests, which are blood tests that can tell if someone has coronavirus antibodies, signifying a past exposure to the virus. These tests, however, cannot tell if someone currently has COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

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