

Testing and Trust

Case study 6: May, 2020

First-year University Student (Female, 19, White white) from Germany, living in university halls with her partner in Edinburgh. Both decide to leave the city after the university announces closure and travel to northern Scotland for the summer. They hold a farewell gathering where an attendee later tests positive for COVID-19. They develop COVID-19 symptoms and isolate for three months in various short-term lets while experiencing long-term post-infection symptoms and seeking tests.

Testing process

Stage	Diagnostic Burden
Triage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They both develop a dry cough after moving into their holiday accommodation (late March) and their health deteriorates quickly. She experiences more severe symptoms (headache, body aches, fatigue, breathlessness, severe stomach upset). They call an ambulance with breathing difficulties, but at the time no testing is available. <i>“It was really, really scary because at the time we couldn’t even get tested, so we didn’t even know what was happening.”</i> • She recovers after a week, but as weeks pass by, she experiences “flare ups”. During one such episode in May she decides to seek a test to make sure it is not a new infection. • She calls NHS 111 but the phone lines are busy and it takes four to six hours to get through triage and speak with a doctor, who advises getting a test at a testing centre the next day.
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When this second illness episode occurs, she is staying in Forfar but is referred to a testing station in Dundee. “[The doctor] said I need to find someone to drive me there, but there was no-one there, so yes, it was just never an option. [...] So we would have had to take the bus and obviously because it was flaring up, I was thinking, “Okay, we don’t want to do that, because that’s irresponsible.” • Without access to transport, they arrange to have a home test kit sent to their Air BnB. But the booking system fails to recognise their address and the online order doesn’t go through so they telephone to ask for tests to be sent. This delays test kit being sent out “so it was like about five days of isolation”. • Not being able to get a test makes her question whether she wants to continue to live in Scotland in the future.

Test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She follows the home test kit instructions carefully, watching the video and reading the booklet together. She is apprehensive about the sampling as her parents have been tested and found it unpleasant. Her boyfriend takes sample from her and it isn't as bad as she expected. • She later travels home to Germany, where she seeks out further tests because of “flare ups”. She finds the testing is more readily available and more easily accessible than her experience in Scotland.
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She cancels appointments and isolates while waiting for the testing kit and until they receive the result. • She receives a negative result, but maintains suspicion that she had COVID. • She would like to have an antibody test to confirm they had COVID earlier in the year, but uncertainty surrounding immunity makes her doubt their usefulness and they are prohibitively expensive (£160).

“In Scotland, even from my own personal experience, there were no tests available [in March], there was no help structure for anyone who had COVID to actually get the test. It just wasn’t possible, so a lot of the time I felt very alone and you always think your Government or your country is trying to support you and trying to help in some way, and I never had that feeling [...] at least I have my boyfriend who I could put my trust into. But if you don’t have anyone and you cannot trust your Government to deal with it, I think it’s extremely tricky. So yes, I did not feel I could trust Scotland.”

Relationships of trust

Case 6 highlights the impact of testing experiences on multiple relationships of trust. (1) Emotional and practical support, from her partner and the health service, throughout illness and the testing process was very important. (2) An initial motivation to protect themselves by moving out of the city was matched by a deep sense of responsibility to protect others by avoiding public transport and staying in isolation while they experienced COVID symptoms and waited for a test. (3) A lack of availability and accessibility of tests left her feeling abandoned, unsupported and alone, eroding trust in the government response and the overall health system.



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