

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Introduction

The UK National External Quality Assessment Service for Microbiology (UK NEQAS) is organised from the External Quality Assurance Department (eQAD) at the Health Protection Agency (HPA). UK NEQAS was established in 1971 and provides a comprehensive quality assessment service to in excess of 1660 clinical microbiology laboratories in the UK and abroad and is recognised throughout Europe and beyond as a major contributor to quality assurance in clinical diagnostic microbiology.

The scheme is educational in design and provides participants with a wide range of specimens and constructive feedback. The quality assessment service allows participants to monitor the effectiveness of their quality assurance measures and to detect and remedy problems, thus allowing continuing quality improvement.

Please contact us if you have any further questions.

Q. What areas of microbiology are covered?

The schemes cover bacteriology, mycology, parasitology and virology for a range of technologies including molecular, serology, culture and microscopy.

Q. What type of specimens are covered by the schemes?

The majority of specimens are straightforward and correspond to those likely to be found in clinical practice. Occasionally, more challenging specimens may be distributed for educational purposes or where recognition of an unusual pathogen may be of importance to the patient or community. New types of specimens are introduced into the repertoire from time to time and participants are notified when these become available.

Q. How does the service work?

Specimens are prepared in the organising laboratory and distributed to participants with reply forms. Approximately 12 dispatches are made each year and participants receive samples for whatever specimen types they are registered for. The frequency of distribution types ranges from twice a year to 12 times a year. Participants examine the specimens in their laboratory and report their findings to the Organiser through the web (or fax if necessary). Replies are analysed and participants receive an individual report which includes the overall results for the distribution.

Q. How reliable are the specimens?

The specimens are subjected to rigorous quality control in the organising laboratory. Stringent manufacturing practices, past experience with the stability of the specimens and sampling of the batch within UK NEQAS provides good assurance that a participant will not receive an unrepresentative specimen.

Q. How long do I have for testing? What is the timescale for reporting?

For most distribution types three weeks are allowed between the UK dispatch date and return of results.

Q. When will I find out how well I did?

Intended results are available on the day following the close of the distribution and accessed through the secure area of the website.

Q. What happens if I do not get the expected result?

Repeat samples (free of charge) are provided on request. Participants are encouraged to contact us for advice.

Q. When will I find out how well other laboratories performed?

Reports are usually available within 10 working days of the close of the distribution.

Q. What is the period of membership?

Membership of the scheme starts 1st April each year and continues until 31st March in the next year. If a participant joins part way through the annual period, a reduced fee may be payable reflecting the number of samples to be supplied for that part year.

Q. What liability do participants of the schemes have?

Participants of the scheme have entire responsibility for all samples distributed to them under the scheme and all activities carried out by them or any third party in relation to the samples from the time of delivery of the samples.

Q. How can I see my reports?

Electronic copies of reports are accessible on the secure area of the UK NEQAS website.

Q. How can I return my results?

Results can be returned electronically using a web form on the secure area of the website.

Q. Are the schemes accredited?

- All of the schemes are accredited by Clinical Pathology Accreditation (UK) Ltd.
- The CPA standards are based on ISO 9001:2000 ISO Guide 43 part 1 and 2, and ILAC Guide 13.

Q. What is the secure area of the website?

The secure area of the website is accessed by entering your unique laboratory identifier code and password. This area is used for results entry and access to reports and other information specific to your laboratory. For guidance please see <http://www.ukneqasmicro.org.uk/pdf/w032.pdf>

Q. What benefits can participants expect?

- Free repeat specimens are available on request together with previous distributed specimens and strains, thus allowing participants to monitor current and recurring problems.
- Country specific performance is provided when more than 10 laboratories participate, therefore participants can benchmark against their national standard.
- The quality and frequency of distributions (especially in general bacteriology, blood borne viruses and parasitology) consolidates quality practice. Participants receive reliable, homogeneous material as specimens are subjected to extensive characterisation and quality control before release for testing.
- Dissemination of results via the secure website allows participants to investigate problems immediately.
- Tight scrutiny by and input from UK professional microbiologists ensures relevance to participating clinical laboratories.

Please contact us if you need more information or have any other queries about UK NEQAS.

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