MEDIA RELEASE

CARPHA Medical Microbiology Laboratory is Ready to Respond to 2019-nCoV

Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 10 February, 2020: In the event of a 2019-nCoV outbreak in the Region, the reference medical microbiology laboratory (CMML), at the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) is ready and fully equipped to test samples of suspected cases of the virus.

There are no direct commercial flights to the Caribbean from China, and travellers to the Region are screened multiple times prior to their arrival. However, the global situation is changing rapidly and CARPHA is monitoring to determine if sustained transmission of the disease occurs outside of China.

“The Agency is equipped to investigate and manage communicable diseases. In the event of the suspicion of an outbreak in the Region, Member States have specific protocols to follow in their investigation process which includes sending the samples to CARPHA. We are prepared to receive and test samples of suspected cases of the 2019-nCoV with immediate effect,” states Dr. Joy St. John, CARPHA Executive Director.

The reference laboratory is accredited by the Jamaica National Agency for Accreditation (JANAAC) to the international standard for medical laboratories, ISO 15189:2012. Additionally, all laboratory technicians are certified to handle and transport infectious samples in accordance with the World Health Organization (WHO) Guidance on Regulations for the Transport of Infectious Substances which was developed with the International Air Transport Association (IATA).

Head of CMML, Dr. Gabriel Gonzalez-Escobar said, “All systems are in place.” He explained that CARPHA does not accept samples directly from the public. “CARPHA will only receive and test samples from the national referral medical laboratories in Member States. Results for all samples tested at the CMML will be sent electronically to the national referral medical laboratories, who will then disseminate to the health care provider.” He further stated that test results for the 2019-nCoV should be provided within 48 hours, but turnaround time is subject to receipt of a sample in a timely manner.

Good hygiene practices are important for the prevention of the spread of the novel Coronavirus. While the risk of 2019-nCoV to the Region is currently low, CARPHA urges residents and visitors alike to practice basic protective measures against the new coronavirus. The Agency recommends that persons maintain basic hand and respiratory hygiene, and avoid close contact, when possible, with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing. In addition:

- Frequently clean hands using soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub if your hands are not visibly dirty.
- When coughing and sneezing cover mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue. Throw tissue away immediately and wash hands;
- Avoid close contact with anyone who has fever and cough;
- If you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing seek medical care early, and share previous travel history with your health care provider;

For further information about the 2019-nCoV, visit the CARPHA website at www.carpha.org