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Swabs beat aspirates for virus detection

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NASOPHARYNGEAL swabs may be superior to more invasive aspirates for detecting most viral respiratory tract infections, pathologists say.

Dr Jenny Robson, senior pathologist at Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology (SNP), Brisbane, said a study conducted over the past winter season showed that swabs (nasopharyngeal, throat or a combination) yielded significantly more positive results than aspirates for influenza A (28.8% vs 20.6 per cent).

"Nasopharyngeal aspirates have been considered the gold standard, but we would now support a move away from this collection to swabs alone," she said.

GPs could be confident that ordering nasopharyngeal swabs would get a good result, and they were "much more tolerable for the patient".

The study by Dr Meryta May and Dr Robson was presented at the 24th National Serological Reference Laboratory workshop on the Gold Coast recently.

Dr Robson said SNP planned to introduce in the next month a new style of "flocked" swab.

While a conventional fibre swab released 5%-20% of the material collected, the flocked swab released up to 95% and was better tolerated by patients, being less likely to induce gagging, she said.

Meanwhile, the latest influenza notifications confirmed that the 2007 winter flu season was the most severe in a decade, Dr Robson said.

The total number of laboratory-confirmed influenza notifications to date was 10,061, according to Commonwealth figures, with Queensland having almost half of all cases.

SNP figures showed at the season peak in August, more than 30% of respiratory samples in Queensland were positive for influenza A, she said.

The rise in flu notifications likely reflected a big increase in testing by GPs as parents responded to media coverage of six paediatric deaths. □

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