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Embargo: 00.01 Friday, 23 October 2020

Aqua Enviro have been awarded the contract for COVID-19 School Sewage Surveillance.

Aqua Enviro, a SUEZ company, is proud to be part of a consortium on an important new project, known as TERM*, that is looking for traces of SARS-CoV-2 virus in the wastewater of schools. The study will establish whether this could provide a useful 'early warning' system of infection levels. This will provide new evidence on the safety of schools reopening and additional insights on transmission of coronavirus from children-to-children and children-to-adults. The £2.4 million project is funded by the NHS Test and Trace Surveillance Testing Team.

Middlesex University is leading the study in collaboration with Test and Trace's Joint Biosecurity Centre and researchers from Cranfield University, the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, University of Bath, Imperial College London, and University College London.

The TERM project has four key objectives:

- Collate new evidence on the incidence and prevalence of COVID-19 in schools and how this associates with local cases.
- Determine whether a wastewater surveillance system can work at school level, i.e. establish the effectiveness of extracting non-infectious SARS-CoV-2 RNA fragments (the virus that results in COVID-19) from in-school wastewater systems.
- Evaluate the costs of undertaking a wastewater surveillance system at a large scale.
- Explore the feasibility of implementing an early-warning system based on wastewater surveillance data at a community level.

Aqua Enviro are collaborating with the TERM project to install, operate and maintain automated sampling equipment at each of the identified schools throughout the school year. Aqua Enviro were selected for the work due to our ability to safely maintain and install the equipment, providing a complete managed project from installation to sampling and sample delivery. Since analytical data can only be as good as the sample collection, Aqua Enviro's experience in environmental sampling and monitoring is key to the successful delivery of the project and its objectives.

The Principal Investigator, Dr Mariachiara Di Cesare at Middlesex University, said "Most of our knowledge on children comes from a period of general schools' closure and the recent reopening of schools is a big unknown in terms of its impact on the second wave. We are very aware of how uncertain this period is for schools, parents, and the whole of society. We hope to help schools remain open under safe conditions and to prompt a rapid community level response when at risk. Routine wastewater surveillance has the potentiality to inform the targeted use of community level testing. The potential long term sustainability of this approach is what makes it unique".

Professor Lian Lundy at Middlesex University added “The TERM project will generate real world data on the resource implications of undertaking sewer surveillance at priority sites such as schools. Whilst sewage surveillance studies have been undertaken at a wastewater treatment plant influent level, the move upstream to sample at a building level poses additional major challenges for sample collection. We are therefore especially delighted to be working with Aqua Enviro and be able to draw on their expertise in undertaking this novel and ambitious project.”

Rowland Minall of Aqua Enviro said: “Detection of SARS-CoV-2 in wastewater is an emerging field that can potentially offer rapid, non-invasive insights into the health of the people surveyed. We are delighted to offer the onsite support of our sampling technicians and ensure the successful delivery of this project on a national scale.”

Commenting on the study, John Hatwell, Director of NHS Test and Trace Surveillance Testing (Pillar 4) said: “The TERM project is another step forward in our commitment to defeating this invisible killer. We are excited to have Middlesex University lead this study and the potential it offers to identify COVID-19 outbreaks in schools and inform response measures. Not only will the results help us better understand transmission amongst children, but they will enable us to support the safe re-opening of schools.”

Researchers are currently working with schools and setting up laboratories. The aim is to monitor 70 schools throughout England.

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Notes to Editors:
* The School wasTEwater-based epidemiological suRveillance systeM for the rapid identification of Covid-19 outbreaks is referred to as TERM; www.termproject.org

Aqua Enviro is a specialist environmental consultancy which has been synonymous with the wastewater sector for over 20 years. As well as working with all the major UK water utilities, Aqua Enviro, a SUEZ group company, boasts a team of trained sampling technicians with experience of working across a range of sites from municipal wastewater treatment works to oil refineries to chemical plants. All our site work is undertaken in a professional manner, with the highest safety standards in mind.