

Biden flubs claim on WHO virus test kits

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PolitiFact

During Sunday night's debate, while leveling criticism at President Donald Trump's handling of the national response to the coronavirus pandemic, former Vice President Joe Biden said the Trump administration refused to get coronavirus testing kits from the World Health Organization.

"Look, the World Health Organization offered the testing kits that they have available and to give it to us now. We refused them. We did not want to buy them. We did not want to get them from them. We wanted to make sure we had our own," Biden said.

A similar claim on WHO test kits has also been circulating on Facebook.

The Biden campaign referred us to a Politico article that said the WHO shipped coronavirus tests to nearly 60 countries at the end of February, but the U.S. was not among them. That is technically correct, but it suggests that the United States would have been on the list under any circumstances.

The countries WHO helped are ones that lack the virology lab horsepower that exists across the United States. The outreach work by the Pan American Health Organization is a case in point.

The group is WHO's arm in the Americas. It conducted trainings and sent materials to conduct tests to 29 nations. The list included Paraguay, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and many others.

The group said it focused most of its efforts on "countries with the weakest health systems."

"No discussions occurred between WHO and CDC about WHO providing COVID-19 tests to the United States," said WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris. "This is consistent with experience since the United States does not ordinarily rely on WHO for reagents or diagnostic tests because of sufficient domestic capacity."

According to interviews with several infectious disease experts, Biden's statement leaves out key context re-



Coronavirus test kits

Former Vice President Joe Biden
Democrat

The statement

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The verdict

Important context, information left out.

garding how different countries decided on which test they'd use to identify the presence of the coronavirus.

WHO lists seven different approaches — including that of China, the United States, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, France and Germany — each one targeting different parts of the COVID-19 genetic profile.

Christopher Mores, a global health professor at George Washington University, said that when faced with an outbreak, the WHO will usually adopt the best test that a research group brings forward.

Preferred model

The German one became the approach WHO circulated as its preferred model.

Aid groups, such as the Pan American Health Organization, took that model and built their training and supplies around it. If the model was like the recipe in a cookbook, the supplies were the ingredients in a home meal kit from Blue Apron.

Any country could use whatever recipe it preferred, and even if the United States had picked the WHO's protocol, it wouldn't need the WHO to sell it the materials to follow it. Germany released its

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protocol on Jan. 17, but the U.S. decided to have the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention develop its own. That protocol was published Jan. 28.

In this instance, this caused a lag in testing for the virus in the U.S.

The CDC's test was different and more complicated than the German test. It worked in the CDC lab, but when the materials went out to state labs, some of them got inconsistent results. The CDC had to resend packages with new chemical reagents.

State laboratories started developing their own tests and were ready to use them, but had to wait for emergency approval from the Food and Drug Administration. All of this added up to a delay in testing capabilities, which resulted in fewer Americans being tested and an overall slower U.S. response compared to other countries.

When asked to respond to Biden's claim, the Trump campaign pointed to multiple news stories that said it's not uncommon for the U.S. and other countries to develop their own tests during outbreaks and that the CDC did so during Ebola and Zika outbreaks. The campaign also said the CDC's test had a quick turnaround compared to other diagnostic tests like MERS and Zika that took months to develop. And the issue with the CDC's protocol was not the test itself, but rather a manufacturing defect, the campaign added.

That's not how it works

While it might seem odd that the Trump administration shunned the WHO's coronavirus test protocol, it's normal for countries with advanced research capabilities to want to develop a measure that they trust.

"I don't know if WHO agreed to sell

the kits to us, but it should never have been something we needed to do given our technological expertise and the fact we would have 'taken kits from low- and middle-income countries' that otherwise could not make or afford them," Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, said in an email.

It's also unlikely, Mores said, that the WHO offered to sell kits to the U.S., because that's not normally what the organization does.

"In my experience, this is never something that I would have to purchase," he said.

Typically, Mores said, American labs have all of the basic ingredients and equipment to run the test — all that would be needed is the viral sequences and an exact test protocol. The only catch at the moment is that supplies of those basic ingredients are stretched thin due to high demand.

Our ruling

Biden said, "The World Health Organization offered the testing kits that they have available and to give it to us now. We refused them. We did not want to buy them."

Biden has a point that the U.S. did not attempt to use the WHO test. But the U.S. would never have needed complete kits from WHO. Even if it had adopted the WHO testing approach, it already had access to all the necessary materials.

WHO said there was never any talk of WHO sending testing kits to the United States.

Biden's words leave out other important context and information.

The U.S. chose to use its own test, rather than the one circulated by WHO. Other nations, such as China, Japan and France, also developed their own tests. Multiple public health experts said that is not unusual.

Biden's emphasis on WHO offering kits is simply wrong. We rate this claim Mostly False.