

TESTING DENMARK: Public perceptions of test strategies during COVID-19

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BACKGROUND

Tests for COVID-19 have been a vital tool to counteract the spread of infection in Denmark. The public health authorities introduced a national test strategy that developed profoundly during the pandemic; from providing tests to persons with symptoms and a doctor's referral; to providing free PCR and antigen tests to everyone, regardless of symptoms; and further, to introducing a national corona passport that regulated access to workplaces, educational institutions, and public spaces. The aim of the study was to explore public perceptions of the national test strategy and the dilemmas that emerged from the decision to test or avoid testing.

METHODS

We conducted an ethnographic field study from February 2021 to April 2022. Drawing on participant observation in test facilities and semi-structured interviews with more than forty participants, we explored test practices and attitudes towards the national test strategy. The participants were recruited according to different socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and ethnicity, and the data material was coded and analyzed using abductive thematic analysis.

RESULTS

People were generally keen to follow guidelines from the health authorities, but the decision to test involved complex negotiations between public health recommendations, individual needs, social obligations, and the consequences of positive test results. The decision to test produced social and moral dilemmas, as COVID-19 tests became a means to show care for others and demonstrate public spirit. Refusing, avoiding, or forgetting to test was expressed as lack of care or public spirit, and test practices thus established new norms for solidarity and good citizenship during pandemic living.

CONCLUSION

The test strategy led to an increased medicalization of everyday life, as decision-making and actions became structured around or determined by tests. The test strategy shaped daily living and social life, but social and moral dilemmas also shaped public test practices and attitudes towards the test strategy. Public health authorities should take these dilemmas into account when guiding the public towards proper test practices now and in the future, as they impact national test capacity and chains of infections.