ICMR to Leverage IBM Watson Assistant to Bolster Rapid Response to India's Frontline Testing Facilities on COVID-19

New Delhi, May 4, 2020: Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, has collaborated with IBM to implement a Watson virtual agent (called Watson Assistant) on its portal to respond to specific queries of front line staff and data entry operators from various testing and diagnostic facilities across the country on COVID-19. The virtual agent has been deployed on protected pages of the ICMR website that can be accessed only by authorized personnel who are involved with sample collection and testing in hospitals and diagnostic labs. The queries could be related to nature and process of data to be captured by test labs, how to record inventory of test kits & reagents, process of reporting to various Government agencies and references to the latest guidance, in addition to responding to queries on COVID-19 in general.

Professor Balram Bhargava, Director General, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) said, "While India has been able to manage COVID-19 to a certain extent, the challenge still continues to minimize further. It is critical to remain focused on testing, diagnosis and treatment in order to lower the growth curve. With the number of on-field testing teams expanding across the nation as part of India's COVID-19 measures, this collaboration with IBM will help automate responses from the field & facilitate access to accurate & updated data on COVID-19 diagnostics & reporting. This will help augment our teams' response time and allow them to concentrate on priorities like developing & updating testing & treatment protocols and guidance for COVID-19."

Shri. Gopalakrishnan S., Additional Secretary, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India commented, "Technology continues to play a significant role in India's fight against COVID-19, and it is crucial to evaluate and leverage the most effective solutions to support these initiatives. The deployment of IBM's chatbot AI platform is aimed to help ICMR effectively manage the process of capturing data relating to COVID-19."

Commenting on the announcement, **Sandip Patel, General Manager, IBM India/South Asia** said, "As India rises to meet the challenge of COVID-19, it is crucial to enable government bodies such as ICMR to utilize data and capabilities effectively for rapid detection and treatment. This collaboration is GoodTech in action and a testament to IBM's commitment of enabling governments, businesses and citizens across the globe to have access to our technology and expertise in tackling the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic."

The Watson virtual agent is AI enabled and will be able to understand and respond to common queries in English and Hindi, from approved testing facilities for COVID-19 across India at scale, around the clock in a uniform & timely manner, as per the latest guidelines. Queries will be categorized under various headings such as Governance, Logistics, Data entry and sharing, Staff Training & Testing and for complex questions, pre-defined contact information of ICMR is made available. The virtual agent is also expected to help in on-boarding new data entry operators and staff of diagnostic centres, as the COVID-19 test network expands across the country.

For more information about IBM efforts around COVID-19, visit https://www.ibm.com/covid19 and https://newsroom.ibm.com/covid-19.

For more information about Watson Assistant, visit https://www.ibm.com/watson/covid-response.

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