The newly integrated National Health Laboratory Services (NHLS) will ‘easily absorb’ the extra workload imposed by the government’s roll-out of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs next year, says its CEO John Robertson.

Speaking at a press conference shortly before a lavish R1.1 million Sandringham dinner staged to celebrate the amalgamation of the country’s laboratory services, he said the first year of the ARV roll-out would probably not exceed 5% of NHLS capacity. Within 5 years this would probably reach 30% of NHLS capacity.

Robertson said the NHLS would absorb ‘a significant portion’ of the government’s ARV roll-out budget. The November launch was the culmination of 4 years of combining the resources of the South African Institute for Medical Research, the National Institute for Virology, the National Centre for Occupational Health, university pathology laboratories and most provincial laboratories. (For historical reasons, KwaZulu-Natal’s infrastructure will be the last to come on line.)

NHLS chairperson, Ms Sesi Baloyi, told 480 dinner guests assembled under an elaborate marquee at the NHLS’s Sandringham headquarters, that the fee-for-service NHLS would continue to deliver at 30% below the Board of Health Funder’s tariff. Both she and Health Minister Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang paid tribute to health systems consultant Dr Nicholas Crisp for his role in facilitating the integration of the country’s laboratories.

The NHLS is currently struggling to create an equitable payroll scheme for its 3 700 staff members, 2 000 of whom come from the SAIMR and are therefore familiar with a fee-for-service operation. However, most of the remainder, many from the eight universities linked to provincial departments, have been protesting at changes to their working conditions and minimum salary levels.

The glittering Sandringham launch was not lost on them and the security entrance was awash with singing and placard-bearing protestors as black-tied guests arrived.

Robertson said salaries absorbed R60 million of the NHLS budget last year. The NHLS employs 1 300 technicians and technologists (excluding the 250 in KZN), 120 pathologists (excluding 125 in KZN) and 110 registrars (excluding 25 in KZN).

The eight universities, which have 15 heads of departments and graduate about 30 pathologists annually, push 50% of salaries while the existing 120 NHLS scientists produce 25 research publications annually.

Cutting-edge HIV vaccine trials and a breakthrough, now-patented CD4 cell count technique which stand to save the country billions of rands, are among the NHLS’s recent achievements.

Professor Martin Hale, NHLS executive manager of quality assurance, university relations and research, said innovations developed at medical schools were ‘pushed out’ through the NHLS laboratory network to fight diseases and epidemics as they occurred.

Ongoing research around cancer of the cervix and cancer of the...
oesophagus (most prevalent among men) was hugely encouraging. Hale suggested.

'Who knows, we could well develop a vaccine for the papillomavirus,' Hale suggested.

However, what was ‘alarming’ was that half of all scientific output in South Africa now came from the 50 - 60-year age group. He appealed for measures to ‘foster and retain’ young scientists in what was a globally competitive village.

While the shortage of pathologists was twice as bad as in First World countries, South Africa was ‘streets ahead’ of developing countries and led the way in Africa.

There was currently no major impact on public service delivery, but things were ‘teetering on the edge and could go either way’, without large-scale training.

Hale said the NHLS currently had 70 registrar posts vacant.

Robertson stressed that no posts had been cut in the rationalisation.

Added Hale wryly, 'One of the effects of the shift to primary health care is that you do discover more sick patients'.

Chris Bateman