

Position Statement on the regulation of medical laboratory assistants and technicians in Ontario

NOTE: The terms ‘assistant(s)’ and ‘technician(s)’ are used interchangeably by the Ontario Society of Medical Technologists and, for the sake of brevity, are often referred to as laboratory ‘assistant(s)’ in this document.

Background:

Medical laboratory assistants and technicians work in private, hospital, and public diagnostic medical laboratories, specimen collection centres, doctors’ offices, clinics, and numerous other institutions and healthcare facilities in Ontario. Laboratory assistants comprise a significant portion of the medical laboratory workforce. According to Statistics Canada, in 2001 there were 7,465 laboratory assistants employed in Ontario but the current number is unknown. The overall scope of practice of a laboratory assistant is to perform pre-analytical duties. Laboratory assistants, under supervision, perform laboratory tests which require limited technical skills and responsibilities and which do not require interpretation, assessment, or the exercise of independent judgment.

Training of laboratory assistants is achieved in various ways. Entry-to-practice skills and knowledge can be acquired from specialized full-time post-secondary education programs of approximately 6 months in length that are offered by community and

private colleges. Many of these training programs are approved by the OSMT. However, as a prescribed method of training is not legislatively mandated, some lab assistants receive on-the-job training or a combination of various methods to acquire the necessary skills to perform their tasks. Individuals who graduate from full-time education programs approved by the OSMT qualify to write the OSMT Medical Laboratory Assistant/Technician (MLA/T) certification examination with competencies that have been established by the workplace needs of Ontario. Certification is voluntary but is a prerequisite of many employers. The OSMT has certified over 8,000 MLA/Ts since 1988.

In 2005, the College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Ontario (CMLTO), the regulatory body for the Medical Laboratory Technologist (MLT) profession, made a formal request to the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care to initiate the process of regulating medical laboratory assistants and technicians under the Regulated Health Professions Act (RHPA). The primary rationale for the request was cited as the College’s obligation to serve and protect the public interest.

The Ontario Society of Medical Technologists (OSMT) is the provincial association representative of the laboratory profession and the certifying body for Medical Laboratory Assistants/Technicians (MLA/Ts) in Ontario. In its role as the provincial stakeholder representative of laboratory technologists and assistants, the

OSMT has responded to its duty to address the question of whether it would be appropriate to regulate lab assistants. To this end, the Society commissioned an independent survey to gather and analyze relevant information from stakeholders and all levels of laboratory personnel.

Using various methodologies, the survey was carried out by Research/Strategy Group Inc. in 2007 on behalf of the OSMT. The results of the survey are summarized in a published document entitled “*Report on research survey to explore the issues related to the potential regulation of medical laboratory assistants and technicians under the Regulated Health Professions Act*”.

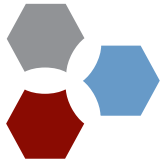
Position:

The results of the survey are not conclusive with respect to enabling the OSMT to put forward a recommendation as to the appropriateness of regulating laboratory assistants. The outcomes did however clearly indicate that much needs to be done to foster a better understanding about regulation prior to the pursuit of self-regulation for this healthcare provider category.

Overview of outcomes and rationale:

The overall approach of the survey was to explore whether lab assistants meet the nine criteria established by the Health Professions Regulatory Advisory Council (HPRAC) in order for a profession to become regulated.

One of the most significant pieces of information substantiated by the



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survey was that there is an enormous lack of knowledge, at least on the part of lab assistants, as to what it means to be a regulated health profession, the role of regulatory colleges, and the responsibilities associated with regulation. The current lack of understanding of these concepts is incongruent with the ability of lab assistants to distinguish between the public interest and the professions' self-interest which is one of the cornerstones of self-regulation. Education about regulation in this respect is a paramount prerequisite to the pursuit of regulation.

Another key criterion for regulation is that the activities of a profession pose a substantial risk of harm to the public. While some respondents expressed concerns about the quality of work carried out by lab assistants, the majority of professionals and stakeholders felt that there is no 'substantial' risk of harm.

Many believe that increasing or standardizing training would alleviate their concerns about quality. Those who felt there was a substantial risk of harm also offered alternative solutions such as systemic workplace

improvements and implementation of minimum entry-level requirements. Many respondents were not confident that regulation would solve concerns about quality and suggested that system-wide approaches might be more effective in reducing error rates. Regulation was seen as a possible means of enforcing entry-level standards and addressing quality concerns.

The answer to the question of whether lab assistants have a distinctive, systematic body of knowledge in assessing, treating or serving their patients/clients, is somewhat illusive. Lab assistant duties overlap with other healthcare professionals such as laboratory technologists, nurses, and respiratory therapists.

A discussion of the analyses by each of the nine criteria is available in the above noted survey report.

Recommendations:

- That the pursuit of regulation for lab assistants be approached methodically and with caution, with great attention to ensuring that there is an understanding of the implications of regulation to the profession and to the public.
- That other avenues be explored to address the incidence of pre-analytical errors as numerous other health professions perform pre-analytical functions. An effective initiative may be a systemic approach to patient safety targeted at interprofessionals.
- That training and entry-level standards be put into place. This could possibly be accomplished through means other than regulation. For example, the qualifications of laboratory personnel could be incorporated into the Ontario Laboratory Accreditation requirements of the Quality Management Program – Laboratory Services or by amendments to the Laboratory and Specimen Collection Centre Licensing Act, Regulation 682.
- That the OSMT MLA/T certification be recognized as the standard entry-to-practice requirement. The OSMT Medical Laboratory Assistant/Technician certification program and examination were built on a solid foundation that addresses the unique workplace practices of Ontario and is in compliance with provincial regulations. ❖



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