

MEDIA STATEMENT

“Wave 2 + Flu” is Coming - Ontario Medical Labs’ Resource Crises Must Be Addressed

August 25, 2020 – Hamilton ON: “With the school year just around the corner, and restaurants and other services re-opening, Ontario must also brace for a second wave of COVID-19. Flu season is also quickly approaching, and the province must address MLT shortages and instrumentation breakdown before it’s too late.

In a normal year, flu season begins in late October. It is a serious routine consideration for most provincial healthcare providers, causing about 12,200 hospitalizations and 3,500 deaths in Canada each year.¹ With its onset, medical labs typically respond by increasing 7-10 hours each workday to accommodate an increase in flu tests. Ontario labs are already working 24/7 completing 20,000+ COVID-19 tests daily.

Adding 7-10 hours to a workday that is already 24 hours is simply impossible with existing staff levels. Ontario Labs have been understaffed and underfunded for years—77% entered the pandemic short-staffed. We have also been anticipating the retirement of 44% of the profession in 4-8 years.

The closure of seven programs in the 1990s has created a lack of trained MLTs for decades now. There are wait-lists at all five remaining MLT schools, and limits on clinical placements to finalize training for those who do make it into those few programs. Without an increase in the workforce, testing for both a second wave of COVID-19 plus the annual flu season is impossible.

When a sample goes into the lab for COVID-19 testing, the physician almost always requests a test for influenza as the symptoms are similar. The test for both is a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, which extracts and detects a gene target(s) of viral RNA. This double testing strains both human and material resources, as the cost of necessary reagents soars. Equipment failure will further impact this situation.

PCR instrumentation (currently used for COVID-19) is estimated to last 7 years under normal use. Much of this equipment was already reaching its life expectancy before the pandemic hit. This equipment is constantly in service and nearing end of life. With new instruments now running around the clock beyond usual limits, their life expectancy may be as little as 1 year. Labs are rushing headlong towards systems failure, which will require stopping testing to purchase, replace, and validate new equipment. There is a distinct possibility this breakdown will coincide with flu season and a potential second wave of COVID-19.

Although HealthForceOntario has taken steps towards short-term lab staffing, a more sustainable plan is needed with regards to people, materials, and instrumentation before labs can endure Wave 2 + Flu.

We need to find provincial solutions to avert lengthy testing delays and ensure urgent patient care for all Ontarians.”

- Michelle Hoad, CEO, Medical Laboratory Professionals’ Association of Ontario.

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¹ “The Flu,” Ontario.ca, updated November 20, 2019, accessed July 15, 2020. ontario.ca/page/flu-facts