

MEDIA STATEMENT: MLT SHORTAGE UNRESOLVED BOTTLENECK FOR COVID-19 TESTING

September 23, 2020 – Hamilton ON: “As we rush past 3.6 million COVID-19 tests processed this week by Ontario Medical Laboratory Professionals, significant human resources shortage concerns remain.

Considering the severity of the pandemic and the monumental demand for testing, provincial agencies have bolstered certain aspects of the testing process. Increases to front-end have taken the form of systems to collect samples: healthcare database software, intake centers (swabs, personnel, facilities), and other administrative measures. There have also been new instrumentation purchases to replace overworked laboratory machinery, an issue the MLPAO flagged this summer.

HealthForceOntario’s short-term initiative supports COVID-19 testing with recently retired and internationally educated MLTs and biomedical sciences students. There are bridging pilot programs starting. The province has also increased testing facilities from 5 labs to 50. Despite all these measures, the workforce is still not large enough. Those 50 testing facilities must take already employed MLTs away from working on other essential testing (cancer, heart disease, infection, and more).

The chronic shortage of Medical Laboratory Technologists (MLTs) persists as an unresolved bottleneck in the COVID-19 testing process. Every single test must be analyzed and confirmed by an MLT. No matter how efficient we make instrumentation and intake systems, we have a finite number of people able to complete that critical step in the testing process.

An example: imagine we have increasing numbers of cardiac arrests in our population and we need more heart surgeries. We could get more operating rooms and scalpels and get people in quicker. Yet if we don’t have any more heart surgeons, we could not increase surgeries. The same is true for MLTs and COVID-19 testing.

This is the crux of why Ontario is scrambling to expand our testing numbers from 25,000/day to 50,000/day. No matter how many tests we intake, the group of people able to confirm results—MLTs—is not increasing.

If anything, after years of working short-staffed and now 6 months of 24/7 COVID-19 testing, this group is at maximum capacity. 77% of Ontario labs entered the pandemic short-staffed, with a further 44% of the profession expected to retire within the next 5 years. This past year’s untenable pace has accelerated retirements, severe sick leave, and some MLTs leaving the profession entirely due to burnout.

The second wave of COVID-19 is already here. Controlling it is only possible through testing. Testing will be a bottleneck and an unresolved healthcare crisis until the MLT shortage is addressed.”

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

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