

House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance – Pre-budget Consultations 2014

This brief is submitted by: Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS)

The Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) is the national certifying body for medical laboratory technologists and medical laboratory assistants, and the national professional society for Canada's medical laboratory professionals.

Our members practice in hospital laboratories, private medical laboratories, public health laboratories, government laboratories, research and educational institutions. Incorporated in 1937 as the Canadian Society of Laboratory Technologists, the society has over 14,500 members in Canada and in countries around the world.

Medical laboratory professionals play a vital role in Canada's patient care system, generating over 440 million results each year. Doctors depend on laboratory test results to accurately diagnose and treat illness, as well as monitor patient health.

There is currently a growing nation-wide shortage of medical laboratory technologists. **Without long-term investments, a shortage of qualified medical laboratory professionals will have an extremely negative impact on patient care in Canada.**

To ensure that all Canadians have access to quality health care, it is imperative to include medical laboratory technology graduates in existing and new incentive programs aimed at recruiting and retaining health care professionals in our rural communities.

CSMLS has created the following written submission for the Standing Committee on Finance and is suggesting the following two recommendations be considered for inclusion in the 2015 federal budget.

Recommendation 1

Ensuring Quality Health Care in Rural & Remote Communities

Approximately 30 percent of Canada's total population live in rural and remote areas of the country, according to the Centre for Rural and Northern Health Research.

Recruiting new medical laboratory technologist graduates to rural and remote communities is a significant challenge for Canadian medical laboratories. To ensure that all Canadians have access to quality health care, it is imperative to include medical laboratory technology graduates in existing and new incentive programs aimed at recruiting and retaining health care professionals in our rural communities.

A 2013 Bank of Montreal survey revealed that post-secondary students expect to graduate from school with more than \$26,000 in debt. According to The Canadian Federation of Students, students studying in Ontario and the Maritimes have had the highest average debt loads, averaging more than \$28,000.

While most medical laboratory technologists (MLTs) enter the workforce after a 3- or 4-year college program, a large percentage of students have university education prior to entering their MLT training program. At The Michener Institute, which has one of the largest MLT programs in the country, 92% of the students hold an undergraduate degree or higher prior to admission. Therefore the level of debt an MLT may graduate with is higher than that of other professions with a college diploma as the entry to practice requirement.

In order to combat the shortage of health care professionals in rural communities, the federal government has committed to forgive a portion of Canada Student Loans for new family physicians (up to \$8,000 per year to a maximum of \$40,000) and nurse practitioners and nurses (up to \$4,000 per year to a maximum of \$20,000). Given the vital role medical laboratory technologists play as part of the patient care team, they should be included in such programs. **Without qualified professionals to generate lab results, quality patient care is impossible.**

This will ultimately support families and help vulnerable Canadians by focusing on health, education and training in rural and remote areas ensuring prosperous and secure communities through the support of this infrastructure.

Recommendation 2

Increasing the pipeline of new lab professionals

About half of all MLTs will be eligible to retire in the next ten years. Shortages of MLTs are already being felt in our rural and remote communities and the impending retirements will exacerbate this issue. The current supply of new MLT graduates is not sufficient to offset the projected retirement numbers.

While the educational programs have capacity to accept additional students, the number of available clinical placements inhibits them from doing so. All lab students have a clinical placement (internship) as part of their educational program. Programs cannot increase spots without corresponding clinical placements, making this a bottleneck in the system. These spots are scarce due to staffing shortages, crushing workloads and lack of dedicated education personnel.

To address this issue, we recommend funding research into the effectiveness of various strategies aimed at improving the throughput of students, including simulation and return-to-service programs to enable retired MLTs to serve as dedicated clinical educators.

This research will help to increase the capacity of our existing educational programs and ensure that the increased throughput does not come at a cost to patient safety.

Executive Summary

There is currently a growing nation-wide shortage of medical laboratory technologists. Without long-term investments, a shortage of qualified medical laboratory professionals will have an extremely negative impact on patient care in Canada. To ensure that all Canadians have access to quality health care, CSMLS makes two recommendations:

- 1. Ensuring Quality Health Care in Rural & Remote Communities**
- 2. Increasing the pipeline of new lab professionals**