

MEDIA STATEMENT

Before “Wave 2 + Flu” Hits, Ontario Medical Labs’ Resource Crises Must Be Addressed

July 16, 2020 – Hamilton ON: “With the Ontario provincial government’s introduction of Bill 195 and their announcement to move into Stage 3, the MLPAO has concerns about the potential readiness of the healthcare system. As public spaces open, Ontario must also prepare for a second wave of COVID-19, impacted further by flu season. The province must fortify the healthcare system to be ready.

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. Without an increase in the workforce, testing for both a second wave of COVID-19 plus the annual flu season is impossible.

Lab teams have been working straight for four months now without reprieve. 88% of lab staff testing for COVID-19 are exhausted from no breaks, no days off, and long hours. Understaffed teams are losing members testing positive, caring for sick family members, taking stress and sick leave. Bill 195 would mean healthcare professionals are unable to recharge. They will likely continue long work hours and be unable take vacation or leaves of absence. Staff will be facing Wave 2 + Flu fatigued.

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. This would align with further staff loss due to stress and illness from already understaffed teams experiencing burnout. Ontario is currently lacking both people and instrumentation to handle Wave 2 + Flu. Labs need immediate intervention 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