

Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario

Report: Patient Care Impacted by Delay in Laboratory Testing

The MLPAO conducted a survey of our members in January 2024 working within labs across Ontario to assess the impact of MLT staffing shortages on patient care. The MLT shortage is having significant negative impacts on patient care. With over 300+ MLT vacancies across Ontario¹ and 39% of MLTs approaching retirement², the MLT storage will only intensify, and patient care will further deteriorate.

The volume of work in 88% of Ontario labs has increased since the pandemic and labs are struggling to keep pace with the workload. In addition to being short-staffed, and the over 300+ MLT vacancies, 39% will be eligible to retire within the next couple of years. This is not sustainable; the fallout of the MLT shortage can result in patient harm and will worsen if MLT shortages continue.

Overview of Survey Findings:

- 88% reported an increase in testing volumes since the pandemic
- 67% reported MLT shortages are affecting testing turnaround times in their respective labs (58% in 2023)
- 53% reported an increase in the number of complaints from physicians and/or patients related to delays in turnaround time
- 38% reported an increase in the number of testing errors* due to staffing shortages (*testing errors include amended reports, proficiency testing discordant results, re-work, etc., which are most often corrected before results are reported to patient, but result in delays in turnaround time)
- 28% reported they have eliminated tests from their testing menu due to staffing shortages which increases the turnaround time as tests must be sent to another lab
- 20% reported an increase in the number of occurrences/adverse events related to wait times, delays in diagnosis, treatment or surgery, where MLT shortages were a contributing factor
- Cancer Care Ontario has established 14-day turnaround time standards for surgical pathology results. 44% of pathology labs that responded to the survey reported that they are only meeting this turnaround time in less than 50% of their cases.

¹ [MLPAO Report: Shortage of Lab Professionals Post Pandemic](#)

² [CMLTO 2022 Annual Report](#)

The MLT staffing crisis is directly affecting the time it takes for physicians and patients to receive results for their lab tests. **67% of labs report that the MLT shortages are affecting their turnaround times.** When the turnaround time for testing increases, physicians and patients are waiting longer for test results. No further action can be taken for the patient's diagnosis or treatment until the physician has received and reviewed the patient's test results. 53% of labs report an increase in complaints from patients and physicians related to delays in turnaround time.

Cancer Care Ontario has established 14-day turnaround time standards for reporting of surgical pathology cases. **In this survey, 44% of pathology labs reported that they are meeting this 14-day threshold in less than half of their cases.** When tests results are delayed, diagnosis, surgery, and treatment are delayed, and patients can miss opportunities for treatment altogether. While patients wait for test results, their condition or disease continues to worsen.

Medical laboratory professionals are integral to healthcare. **70% of medical decisions are based on laboratory results³.** Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario suffered from a shortage of Medical Laboratory Technologists (MLT), and the shortage rages on. The demand for lab services continues to increase as surgeries ramp up, Ontarians return to their physicians, and the population ages. MLTs impact all aspects of patient care, from surgery to emergency rooms to family medicine and mental health.

Healthcare depends on laboratory. MLPAO's [2024 Pre-budget Submission](#) calls for an immediate investment in laboratory health human resources by the Ontario government to prevent further negative impacts to patient care.

Survey Response

66 Lab Directors/Managers responded to the survey. Respondents manage multiple labs in Ontario.

- 91% of respondents were from hospital labs, 5% from community labs, 4% from outside the laboratory
- 41% from large urban centres, 27% from mid-sized urban centres, 24% from rural centres, 8% from rural locations

Other Comments

- Delay in chemotherapy treatments, and delay in transfusions
- Complaints regarding increased TATs for referred out pathology
- Increased patient complaints due to delays in diagnosis, missed treatment timelines

³ [CDC – Strengthening Clinical Laboratories](#)



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L'Association des professionnels des laboratoires médicaux de l'Ontario

- Some errors associated with “scaling up” production as we face increased testing volumes with decreased staff
- There are increased testing errors and reduced QA. There are also increased incidence of injuries to our newly hired MLTs who are forced to work fast while still learning the ropes.
- Nursing shortage has caused increased workload in dealing with issues. The use of agency nurses has caused the POCT lab and lab oversight (incident report handling and mistake correction).
- Difficult to retain staff, have in-experienced staff and not enough experienced staff to support and advise
- More than half our staff is post-retirement, or able to retire in the next 3 years
- MLT shortages in external labs have a greater impact on our operations than our internal MLT staffing pressures. At our site, physician and nursing shortages lead to increased workload in labs as locum physicians, and inexperienced physicians/nurses create more frequent errors.
- Pathology is in bad straights in large centers. TAT is 10-12 weeks for a Pathology report on complex cases, patients are missing the treatment windows as per CCO guidelines. Surgeons are directing patients to make formal complaints which causes more delays to the lab. Staff are overworked/burned out and overtime costs have increased.

The Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario is a non-profit health professional organization founded in 1963 with over 4,100 members across the province. The MLPAO represents the interests of Medical Laboratory Professionals in Ontario with government, regulatory bodies, educational institutions, health care professions and other stakeholders.

For media inquiries please contact Michelle Hoad, CEO at 416.485.6768 (mhoad@mlpao.org)