



Medical Laboratory Professionals' Association of Ontario  
L'Association des professionnels des laboratoires médicaux de l'Ontario

## Report: Medical Laboratory Professionals at a Breaking Point – Two-Year Analysis

Medical Laboratory Professionals have been the backbone of the COVID-19 crisis. Each of Ontario's 23 million COVID-19 tests has been processed by a regulated Medical Laboratory Technologist (MLT). Medical Laboratory Assistant/Technicians (MLA/Ts) have supported the pandemic at specimen collection centers, at the bedside of COVID-19 patients, and working alongside MLTs.

This group has also processed the 270 million laboratory tests done each year to support our healthcare system. COVID-19 ICU patients all require constant testing, and laboratory professionals were always there to ensure accurate and reliable results were provided for their care. Several major events have impacted this group as the pandemic progressed:

1. **Short-Staffed:** 70% of labs were short-staffed prior to COVID-19
2. **Excluded from TPP:** Labs were excluded from Temporary Pandemic Pay in May 2020. Despite working directly with COVID-19 patients, lab teams were deemed not essential
3. **Increasing Testing, Decreasing Staff:** Increasing COVID-19 testing targets, no increase in Health Human Resources
4. **Omicron Testing Surge:** Omicron testing surge overwhelmed exhausted professionals in Phase 4 of the pandemic – lab teams spent the holiday testing
5. **No Retention Bonus for Lab:** February 2022 - Ontario Nurses receive \$5000 retention bonus, still no recognition for medical laboratory professionals

We conducted surveys in June and December 2020 in the first year of the pandemic. This report compares that data to a recent pulse taken in January 2022. It reveals medical laboratory professionals and laboratory services in a state of crisis two years later:

1. **Almost 90% Experiencing Burnout:** Poor mental health and contemplation of self-harm
2. **All-Time Low Morale:** 86.4% reporting morale negatively affected by lack of recognition
3. **73% actively desire to leave the profession:** 46% are contemplating early retirement, with an additional 27% wishing they could leave but not currently seeing an option
4. **Increasing Workload and Longer Testing Turnaround Times (TATs):** 68% working above-average schedules, longer turnaround times because of a shortage of staff increased 22% from 2020, patient results prioritized over quality assurance and maintenance

COVID-19 is not over for laboratories. Our healthcare system faces a significant backlog estimated at approximately 20 million<sup>1</sup> diagnostic tests and procedures contingent on laboratory services. We must retain dwindling numbers of medical laboratory staff before mass exodus from the field.

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<sup>1</sup> ["Ontario Medical Association releases five-point plan for better health care," Ontario Medical Association, October 26, 2021.](#)

**Contact Michelle Hoad, Chief Executive Officer for further information:  
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## Issue 1: Almost 90% Experiencing Burnout

*"I have actually had contemplations of self-harm."*

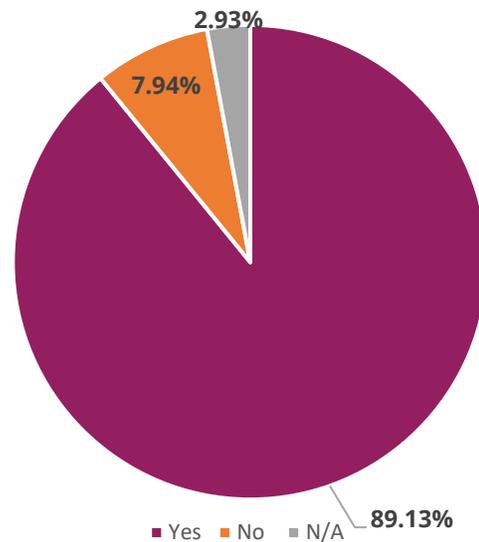
Many factors are impacting the poor mental health of Medical Laboratory Professionals.

While a forthcoming report from Dr. Behdin Nowrouzi-Kia (University of Toronto) and Dr. Basem Gohar (University of Guelph) will explore this in greater depth, initial data from our survey indicates burnout because of overwork and long hours continues to worsen.

**89% of Medical Laboratory Professionals are now experiencing burnout**—almost 90% of the profession—compared to 82% in 2020.

This is affecting their home lives, with 84% reporting an impact, up from 80% in 2020.

Comments from medical laboratory professionals range from extreme stress to thoughts of self-harm.



**Fig. 1 - 2020-2022: Are you and/or your colleagues getting burned out as a result of overwork or long hours?**

## Issue 2: All-Time Low Morale

*"We are front-line workers who didn't even get Pandemic Pay, yet we often deal with COVID-positive patients daily. It feels like nobody knows who we are and how much we bend over backward for doctors, nurses, patients, the community...all in the name of quality results that affect patients lives."*

It is important to emphasize comparative data for this section was collected in June 2020 at the height of scaling up pandemic response, just one month after the Ontario Government had announced Medical Laboratory Professionals would not be included in the Temporary Pandemic Pay initiative despite working directly with COVID-19 patients. At that time, morale was at an all-time low at 83.5%.

In 2022, it's even worse—86.4% are now reporting morale or dedication to their work has been negatively affected by a systemic lack of recognition of medical laboratory professionals over the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.



# 86.4%

are now reporting **morale or dedication to work has been negatively affected** due to a lack of recognition of medical laboratory professionals during the pandemic.

### Issue 3: Making Plans to Leave the Profession

*“Approaching retirement age, do not wish to retire, but I am quickly burning out. I visited my financial advisor to run the retirement numbers and I am in a good position financially, to retire. If the staff shortage and stress continue, I will jump ship.”*

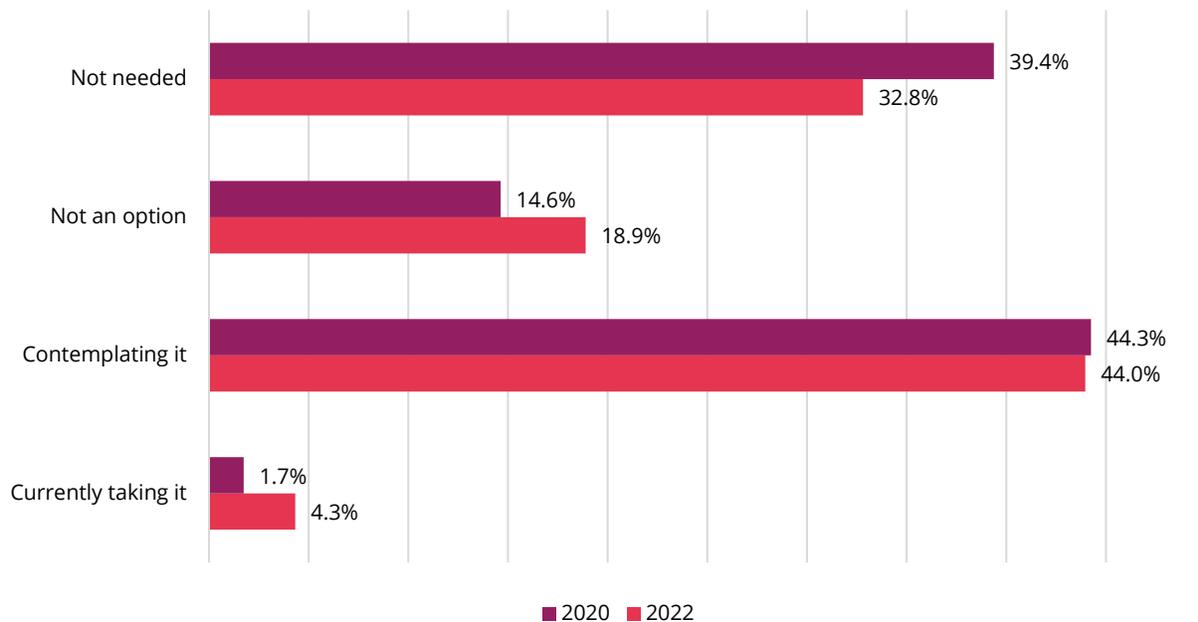
With 41% of practicing MLTs in Ontario are eligible to retire within 2-4 years,<sup>2</sup> many are already considering retirement.

With the added stress from ongoing staffing shortages, lack of recognition, and burnout from extra work because of COVID-19, even more medical laboratory professionals to consider early retirement or leaving the field. 73% actively desire to leave the profession—46% are contemplating early retirement, with an additional 27% wishing they could but not currently seeing an option.



Additionally, the number of those taking sick leave has increased dramatically. Far more do not see it as an option at their workplace, and there are far fewer professionals who see it as unnecessary.

**Fig. 2 - 2020-2022: Have you or are you contemplating stress or sick leave after this year?**



<sup>2</sup> CMLTO, “Medical Laboratory Technologists: 2020 Health Human Resource Report,” Registration Statistics Report, March 2021, page 7, assumes retirement eligibility at 55.

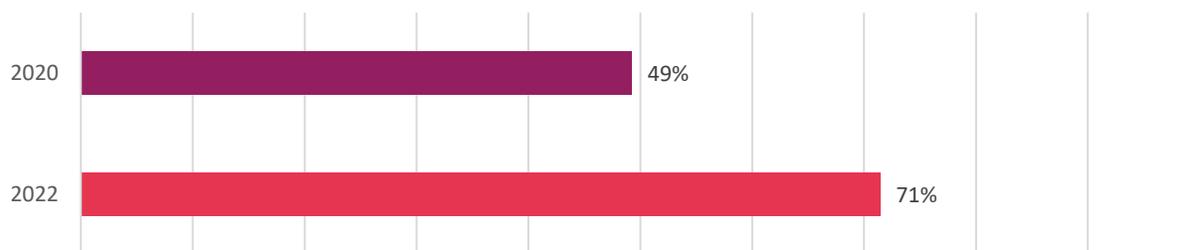
#### Issue 4: Increasing Workload and Longer Testing Turnaround Times (TATs)

*“We were short-staffed before the pandemic, and even more short-staffed now. Vacation requests are being denied. Our part-time workers are working full-time hours. Overtime shifts are available every week.”*

70% of labs entered COVID-19 short-staffed.<sup>3</sup> Lab leaders have indicated a shortage of 466 MLTs, exceeding new MLTs entering the field (291) by a large margin.<sup>4</sup> This is increasingly impacting the workload of medical laboratory professionals. **68% of medical laboratory professionals are working above-average schedules** (i.e. double shifts, no days off, etc.), an increase of 14% compared to 2020. While above-average schedules were already occurring in 2020, we can now see the prolonged impact of this pressure on staff.

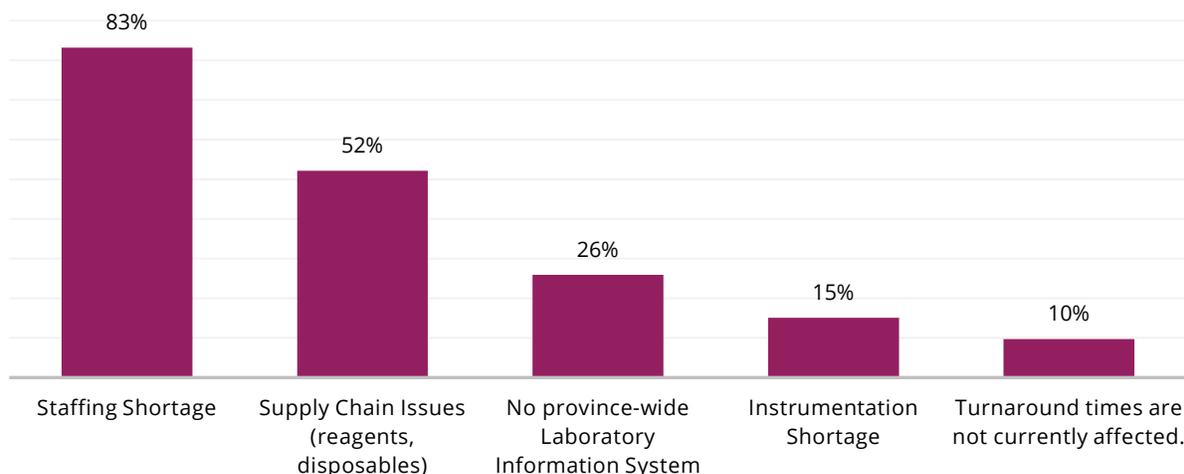
Labs are now experiencing longer turnaround times because of a shortage of staff by an increase of 22% from 2020. This means a greater length of time between test being ordered by a physician and a sample collected from the patient and when that test is processed and analyzed by the lab team.

**Fig. 3 - 2020-2022: Are you experiencing longer turnaround times because of a shortage of staff?**



In addition to TATs, other services are impacted: *“Patient results always come first but Quality Assurance is neglected. Ordering supplies is missed, eventually the machine will break due to missed maintenance etc.”*

Health Human Resources are just the start of factors impacting turnaround times. While 83% indicated the staffing shortage was impacting TATs, 52% highlighted supply chain issues as the next priority with limited access to reagents and disposables, such as blood collection tubes, butterfly needles, etc.



<sup>3</sup> Based on a survey of lab leaders and professionals in May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Based on a survey of 120 medical laboratory workplaces in Spring 2021.