



Saskatchewan Society of Medical Laboratory Technologists

Impending Shortage of Medical Laboratory Technologists

A nation-wide shortage of medical laboratory technologists (MLTs) is predicted as early as 2005 resulting in a serious health risk to all Canadians. This shortage is particularly evident in Saskatchewan. Updated membership numbers indicate that the number of practicing MLTs in Saskatchewan is shrinking at a more rapid rate than expected. ***As of December 2001 the number of practicing MLTs reached 967, a level not expected to be reached until 2010!***

The Saskatchewan Society of Medical Laboratory Technologists (SSMLT) has urged the provincial government to take immediate action to avert this health care crisis.

The SSMLT is the licensing and professional society for medical laboratory technologists in Saskatchewan. It represents 967 highly trained medical laboratory technologists who conduct sophisticated tests on blood, body fluids, and tissue specimens in medical, research, and other laboratories. Medical laboratory technologists represent the third largest group of health care professionals after physicians and nurses.

At current training rates (16 students annually), there simply won't be enough new technologists entering the work force to replace those who retire. Nor will Saskatchewan be able to recruit MLTs from other Canadian jurisdictions because many training programs in Canada have been cut back and some have been eliminated altogether. Compounding this crisis is the fact that it will hit at a time when the demand for health care services is expected to grow due to the aging of the population.

A recent (December 1999) survey of approximately 1100 SSMLT members indicated the following:

The majority of MLTs currently practicing in Saskatchewan:

- Are between the ages of 35 and 45
 - intend to retire between the ages of 50 and 60
 - actually do retire within the age range of 50 to 60
- By the year 2015:
 - 480 or 40% of the current SSMLT members will be retired
 - the total SSMLT membership will fall to less than 700 if current training levels are not increased
 - The replacement of 480 MLTs between the year 2000 and 2015 will require an average training rate of 30 graduates per year.

The Advisory Committee of Health Human Resources (ACHHR), an inter-provincial committee comprised of deputy ministers of health or their designates, conducted an environmental scan on the human resource issues affecting medical laboratory technology. The results were published in a report in May, 1999. The report concluded that, "the anticipated rate of retirement in the 'baby boom' technologist workforce in the next five to 10 years is expected to create a significant shortage, which is already being felt." It recommended that a national strategy be developed to address this impending human resource crisis.

Our entire level and quality of health care is at risk. When steps are taken, it will take a minimum of two years before any additional medical laboratory technologists will be available to enter the workforce.

Although this crisis is no longer avoidable, quick, decisive action needs to be taken to reduce its duration. We must take action now to ensure that there will be a sufficient number of medical laboratory technologists to meet the needs of Saskatchewan residents. ***As the current trend continues, laboratory testing capabilities may be downsized; resulting in referral of testing out of province, and the possible delay of diagnosis and treatment.***